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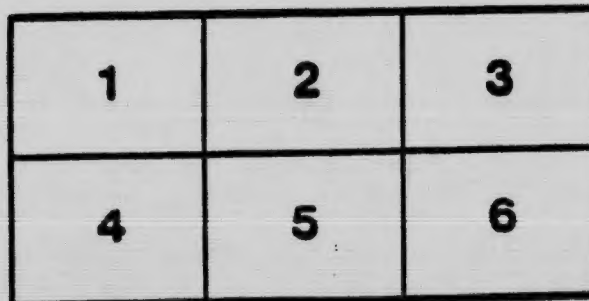
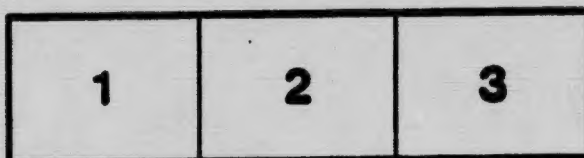
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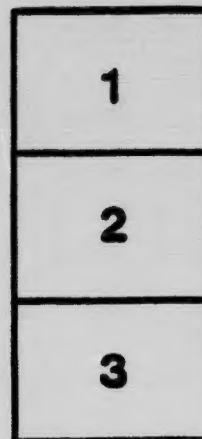
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LOVE AND THE IRONMONGER

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LOVE AND THE
IRONMONGER

BY
F. J. RANDALL

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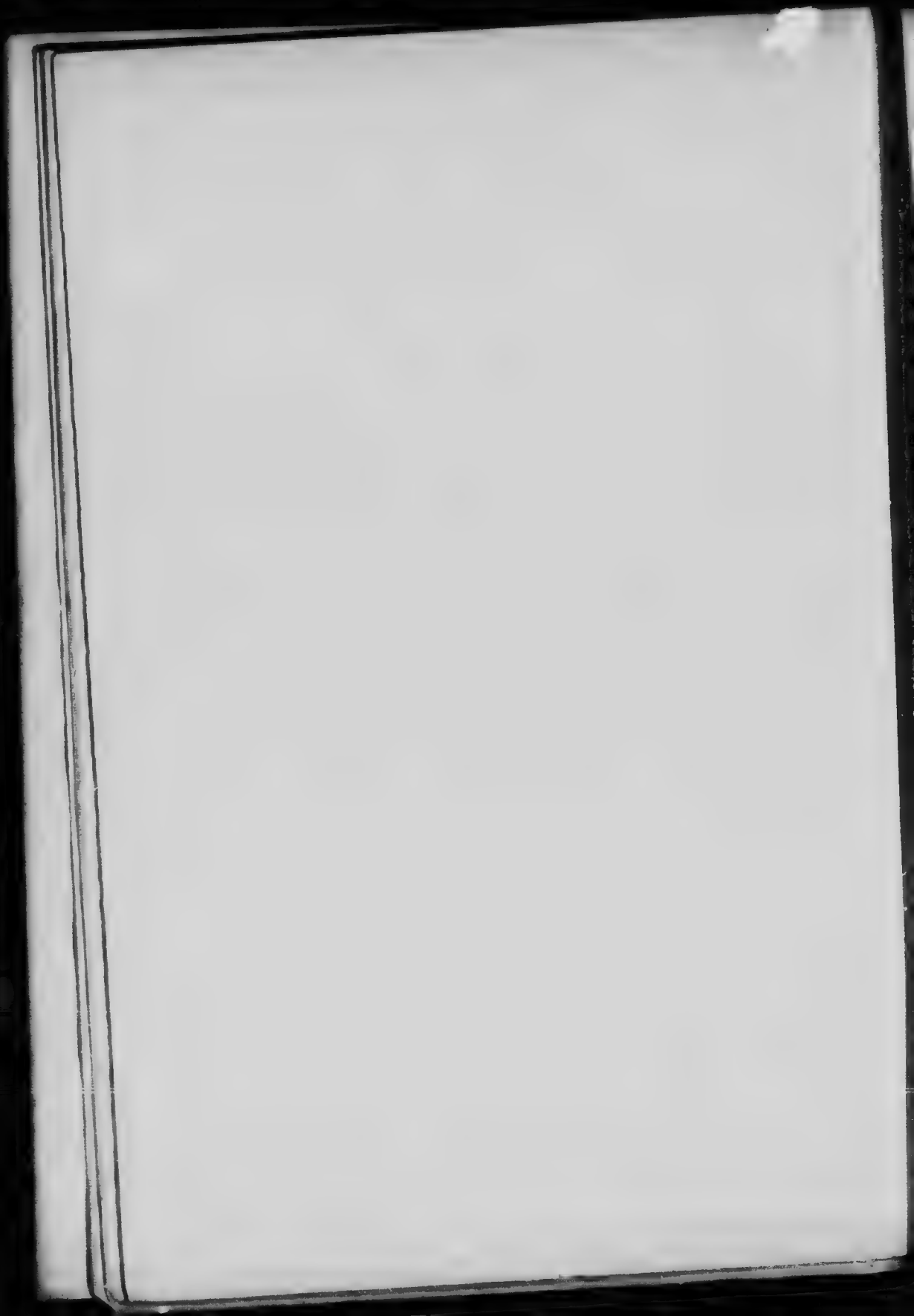
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*LOVE AND THE
IRONMONGER*



LOVE AND THE IRONMONGER

A PLAIN TALE OF UPPER THAMES STREET

CHAPTER I—*What came to George Early through a Keyhole*

THE offices of Fairbrother and Co. were in the full swing of business when George Early sauntered in and took his accustomed place at a small desk.

"What time do you call this?" asked the head clerk severely, looking up from a ledger.

George looked at his watch.

"Half-past eight," he said intelligently; "that makes me half an hour late, doesn't it? Matter of fact, old chap, I——"

"That'll do," said the head clerk; "just you keep your place. And keep your time, too," he added warningly, "or else there'll be a vacancy in this office."

He marched off with a ledger under his arm, and George, with a wink at his nearest colleague,

pulled a morning paper from an inner pocket and consulted the sporting column.

Fairbrothers' was an easy-going firm, that had the reputation of being good to its employees. If a man once got a seat on an office-stool there he was considered to have a berth for life, supposing of course that the iron trade and Upper Thames Street continued to exist. Fairbrothers' never dismissed a man unless he was a downright rogue, and in such cases it was believed that they secretly looked after him if he happened to be in a very bad way.

Nobody in the office minded much what was said unless Old Joe Fairbrother, the venerable head of the concern, happened to say it. If there was a threat of dismissal from anybody else the threatened man affected contrition and laughed up his sleeve. And although this general air of safety was as soothing to Thomas Parrott, the head clerk, as to anybody else, that admirable man's sense of duty compelled him to occasionally sound a warning note to his subordinates.

This morning the head clerk was in a bad temper, and found fault with everybody, especially with George Early.

"Who's been upsetting Polly?" asked George, looking round; "seems to have got 'em, doesn't he?"

"Wants a cracker," said the shorthand clerk ;
"got a bad attack of the pip."

"If he'd like his poll scratched," said George,
impudently, "he's only got to say so."

A red-haired junior chimed in.

"It ain't that," he said ; "Polly's looking for
a new perch. Thinks Old Joe'll be wanting a
manager soon."

Any reference to the head of the firm interested
George.

"What's the matter with Old Joe?" he asked.

"Matter? What ain't the matter? you mean.
Got one foot in the grave and the other on the
edge. The poor old chap's fairly breaking up."

George turned thoughtfully to his work, but
his mind ran on other things ; the decay of the
head of the firm opened up possibilities of pro-
motion. A manager would be wanted soon.

To jump from the position of clerk to manager
was unusual ; but unusual things of that sort had
a fascination for George Early. The work would
just suit him ; he always felt he was born to
command. Compared with the other men in the
office, George was quite a new hand ; but the
other men had less imagination and less con-
fidence, and if they chose to follow the method
of rising step by step it was their own affair.

The offices of Fairbrother and Co. were large
and roomy, and occupied the lower part of an

old-fashioned building in Upper Thames Street, adjoining a warehouse and a wharf. On the first floor facing the street and next to the showrooms was a large, handsome room. This was the private office of old Joseph Fairbrother, and no robber's cave with its glittering treasures had a greater fascination for any ambitious young man than had this apartment for George Early. The large roomy armchairs and the big safe appealed to him strongly. He liked to picture himself sitting in the biggest chair and sternly inquiring why certain orders had not been despatched a week ago; and he never went inside the door without the hope of coming out with an increase of salary.

The private office now became to George what the deserted wing of a country mansion is to the family ghost. If there was anything to go upstairs, he got it by hook or crook, and became the envoy. He liked to go best when the old gentleman was there, and when he wasn't George would look round the room, admire the handsome furniture, and stay as long as he dared. Sometimes he would carry up two letters and find that the room was empty. Then he would bring one down to make a second journey.

One morning he went up without anything at all. On this occasion he had seen Old Fairbrother in the lower office preparing to go out. George

glanced around quickly, hoping that an umbrella or something of the sort had been left behind, so that he might dash after the retreating brougham. There was nothing.

"Just my luck!" he murmured, crossing to the window.

He looked out into the street, and, seeing that the brougham had departed, selected the biggest armchair, and from its depths thoughtfully perused the court column of a daily newspaper lying at hand.

Unfortunately he became so absorbed that he did not hear the familiar rattle of his employer's brougham as it returned and drew up outside, and it was not till the head of the firm was half-way up the stairs that he scented danger.

With alacrity George looked for means of escape, and at once turned to that which seemed easy and safe. This retreat was a private staircase which led direct from the room to the upper floors of the warehouse. He skipped across and closed the door behind him quickly and softly.

A second later old Joseph Fairbrother entered the room, and, as he did so, George Early found himself in another fix, for instead of passing through the door of the private staircase he had entered a tiny, box-like room which stood beside it. This room had no other outlet, and the

venturesome clerk was a prisoner until his master chose to take himself off.

The young man selected the keyhole as a means of learning what was happening. It was a large keyhole, and he had ample means of proving that, so far as looks went, "Old Joe" had "one foot in the grave," as had been affirmed. To-day he looked older and more decrepit than usual, and for five minutes he did nothing but sit and look at the fire.

At the end of that time somebody else entered the room. George waited anxiously for the other party to come within range, and when he did so it proved to be Parrott.

"Sit down, Mr. Parrott," said Joseph Fairbrother; "one moment—hand me a cigar, please, and take one yourself."

The head clerk nervously helped himself to a cigar, and followed the lead of his chief as he lit up.

For another five minutes the old gentleman gazed abstractedly into the fire, finally shifting his gaze to the face of Parrott, who looked at everything in the room except his employer.

"Mr. Parrott," said Old Fairbrother, solemnly, "do you know why I have brought you here?"

The head clerk looked up with a start and coughed. He did not know why he had been brought there.

"Then I'll tell you," said his master. "I have made my will, Parrott, and I'm going to talk about a little legacy I have left you."

Parrott didn't know what to do, so he looked as bright as he could, and cleared his throat, as if to reply.

"Wait a minute," said the old gentleman, lifting a finger; "don't you thank me till you know what you're getting. I've had my eye on you, Parrott, for a good many years; I've watched you grow from a boy upwards, and I've noticed your good points and your bad ones. You're not the only one I have watched, but you're the only one I'm going to talk about now. When I have had my little say with you, there are others I shall talk to."

He took a long pull at his cigar, and allowed his eyes to rest on the uncomfortable Parrott, who seemed somewhat more doubtful of the issue of the interview than he had been a while ago.

"You're not my ideal of a man, Parrott," he continued; "but, of course, we all have our faults. You're a good man at your duty, and you believe in others doing their duty, which is right enough. There are not many in the office that love you, and I dare say you put it down to their selfishness and ignorance, or perhaps to envy. It isn't that, Parrott; it is you they don't

like. They like a man who's sociable and one of them, and who's affable and generous. They don't like you because you're mean."

This home-thrust sent the colour rushing to the face of the head clerk, and the blood of his ancestors prompted him to get up and say—

"Really, sir, I——"

"All right, all right," interrupted his master, "this is just between ourselves. I don't say that you are all to blame. These things are sometimes born in us, and we are not always able to root them out. Now, don't you interrupt me, but listen to what I've got to say.

"You are a mean man, Parrott; but I am of opinion that you are mean by habit, and not by nature. Habits are things that we can get rid of if we choose. I want you to get rid of your habit.

"You know me, and you know that if I can use my wealth to reform a man, I will do it. I might leave a lot of money to societies, and still do little good with it; I might distribute it over a large surface so that it benefited nobody. That's not my way. I should be doing more good by making sure of three or four men. You need reforming, Parrott, because meanness is a curse, and no man who has it badly, as you have, will ever be the ideal of his fellow-creatures.

"I have made my will, and I have left you

an income to begin on the day of my death. You will not have long to wait. When I die you will receive the sum of five hundred pounds yearly so long as you live."

Parrott nearly jumped out of his chair with joy.

"Stop a bit!" cried Old Fairbrother; "there are a few conditions tacked on to this. First and foremost is this: You will receive this income on condition that you get rid of your habit of meanness. That is to say, if a man asks you for a loan of half a crown, or half a sovereign, or, in fact, wants to borrow anything from you, you shall lend it him. My lawyer will have the matter in hand, Parrott, and if it can be proved that you cling to your habit of meanness, and do not oblige a man when asked to do so, your income ceases.

"I shall not interfere with your position here. It will be the same when my successor takes the management. And this contract will be known to nobody but ourselves and my lawyer. Now, what do you say? Will five hundred pounds a year help you to get rid of that habit of yours? Don't be afraid to say so if you would rather not have the legacy."

George Early listened in amazement, as the head clerk murmured his thanks; and his astonishment was further increased by the astounding

ingenuity of "Old Joe," who laid bare the plan of the legacy in its minutest detail. The lawyers were to follow their own methods in keeping observation on the legatees, and in due course would warn them of a breach of agreement. Three warnings were accorded before the legacy was lost.

"Not a word to any one, mind," said Joseph Fairbrother, as Parrott prepared to depart. "Just put yourself in training, that's all. Send Mr. Busby to me."

The head clerk departed, and a few minutes later Busby came in.

Albert Busby was the firm's cashier, one of the oldest of the staff, yet still a young man, being under forty. In appearance he was the most pious of black-haired Sunday School teachers; in reality it was difficult to get a word of truth from his lips. Lying was not part of his business, but distinctly a hobby, and it came as naturally to him as if he had been taught from birth.

Old Fairbrother offered Busby a cigar, then delineated his character in the same way as he had done that of Parrott. A legacy of £500 a year awaited Busby if he chose to give up his habit of lying and stick to the truth. Of course, Busby readily consented. He said for the future no lie should ever pass his lips.

"You'll lose the money if it does," said "Old Joe," laconically.

The third and last man to be interviewed was Gray—Jimmy Gray, the accountant. Gray's face told its own tale, and those who couldn't read it had only to note Gray's movements, which were too often in the direction of a public-house.

The drink habit had Gray fairly in its toils, but he was willing to give it up for £500 a year, and he honestly believed he could.

When "Old Joe" stood alone once more, he took another long look at the fire. Then he gave a sigh, a smile, a shrug of the shoulders, and ended by putting on his hat and departing.

As soon as he was safely out of earshot, George Early stretched himself and walked thoughtfully into the middle of the big room.

Having arrived there, he gave voice to three words, audibly and distinctly: "Well, I'm hanged!"

Planting himself before the fire, he went musingly over the whole scene again. It was astounding. Three legacies of five hundred pounds a year each! George Early could scarcely realize the significance of it.

Presently, as he carefully thought over the matter, he began to smile, then to laugh; and when he finally returned to his office-stool, by way of a tour through the warehouse, he was bubbling over with mirth.

CHAPTER II—*A Young Man in search of Bad Habits*

THE first thing that struck George Early on his arrival at the office next morning, was the extreme seriousness of the three legatees. Gray looked so sober and miserable that George was surprised at it passing unnoticed. For once Busby sat quietly in his office-seat, instead of entertaining Gray with some fictional incident of the night before. And Parrott was too occupied with his thoughts to give black looks to the late comers.

"A nice lot they are to get £500 a year!" thought George. "I call it a sin. It's a dead waste of money!"

He strolled over to Gray's desk. "Morning, Mr. Gray," he said affably.

"Good morning," said Gray, in a voice hoarse with temperance.

"Back that little thing yesterday?" asked George, in a whisper. "You know—Flower-of-the-Field for the Sub.?"

"No," said Gray.

"I did it," whispered George—"ten to one. Bit o' luck, wasn't it?"

Gray assented, and George leaned over the

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desk to be out of hearing of Busby. He touched Gray on the hand with one forefinger.

"I've got a drop of Scotch in the desk," he said; "real old stuff. Going to have a nip?"

A flash of eagerness came into Gray's eyes, and then died away.

"No, thanks," he said hastily; "I don't think I will. The fact is, I—I don't feel up to it this morning."

"Blue ribbon?" asked George, opening his eyes in wonder.

"No—oh no," answered Gray, with some confusion; "no, nothing of that."

"Then I've a drop," said George, enjoying the struggles of his victim. "It's ten years old, and strong enough to break the bottle. Got it from a friend of mine who works in a distillery."

Gray's eyes glistened; but George moved off to Busby's desk before he had time to give way.

Busby looked up and nodded, then went on with his work. This was something out of the ordinary for Busby, who rarely missed an opportunity to gossip. George Early chuckled to himself and began to sharpen a pencil.

"Saw you last night, Mr. Busby," he said presently. "Nice little girl, that sister-in-law of yours. Fine figure she has, too."

Busby rubbed his chin a moment, and became deeply interested in his work.

"She's not my sister-in-law," he said slowly.

"No?" said George, surprised. "Now, look here, you told me that little girl was your wife's sister. You don't mean to say she's—she's no relation?"

Busby made no reply, and George began to chuckle audibly.

"You sly dog!" he laughed. "Well, you are a sly dog! Fancy you trotting out a nice little girl like that! And I'll bet your wife doesn't know it. I'll bet she doesn't—does she?"

Busby frowned and flicked over some papers. "I say, Early, just you clear off; I've got a lot to do this morning," he whispered.

"Oh, get out!" said George. "You know I want to hear all about it. You are a lucky beggar! Did you kiss her? I'll bet you kissed her a few times. So would I. And, fancy, your wife knowing all about it. No!"

"She doesn't!" started out Busby, with reckless truthfulness.

"Not know it?" cried George. "Well, you are a devil! Come on, old chap, tell us the yarn. I suppose you took her out for the evening—eh? The little minx! And she knows you're a married man."

"She doesn't!" cried Busby, with another burst of frankness.

"Great Scott!" said George. "Did she——"

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"Look here, Early," began Busby, growing red in the face; "didn't I tell you I was busy?"

George Early gave another audible chuckle, and went back to his stool, after pinching Busby's arm as a token of his appreciation of such devilry. Before settling himself, he looked over towards the desk of the head clerk; but that estimable man was evidently not in a mood for conversation.

"I'll touch his tender spot later on," said George to himself. "They are all taking it very seriously; and so would I if I had the chance. £500 a year for keeping sober! Good Heavens! It makes me mad to think of it."

Work was out of the question with George that morning, his head was full of legacies. "I wonder if Old Joe would spring another five hundred if he found a good case," he mused. "There'd be no harm in trying him, anyway."

There seemed to be something in this idea, so George endeavoured to fix upon a sound serviceable vice likely to arouse the interest of the head of the firm. "I might become a chronic borrower," he thought; "that's a pretty bad habit. A man who borrows money is always a nuisance to his friends and acquaintances. But whether it's worth five hundred or not is another question. There are several objections, I'm afraid. I dare say Old Joe would prefer to have

a borrower here to help Polly reform ; besides he'd know that as soon as people stop lending the habit ceases. That's no good."

George wrote down all the vices he could think of without being able to find one strong enough. There were plenty of second and third-rate failings, but not one that might be called of the first water. "It's just like those selfish brutes," he said bitterly, "to monopolize the only decent bad habits there are! I shouldn't wonder if the artful hounds got wind of it a long time ago, and went about drinking and telling lies under Old Joe's nose just to get the money. Men like those are capable of anything."

In this unenviable state of mind George Early went out to a bread-shop, and gloomily watched all the lunchers in the hope of discovering some objectionable practice that he had missed. The only habit that seemed to be noticeable was flirtation, and as George was doubtful of its viciousness he finished his coffee and strolled towards Billingsgate. Here the first really healthy suggestion came to him. He got it by treading on the toe of a market porter, who cursed him with a volubility that only time and a natural leaning that way could have made perfect. Instead of replying with some graceful oaths of his own, George felt inclined to invite his unknown friend to a drink.

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"Swearing's a habit," said George, chuckling, "and a damn bad habit too. Yes, by St. Christopher, that ought to do for Old Joe! There's something rich about a vice like that, and if it doesn't hit him in the eye straight away he's not the benevolent old man I take him to be."

Somebody ran into George as he entered the office, and Mr. Early promptly rattled out a string of oaths, just by way of practice.

The language that afternoon was such as Fairbrothers' had never known since the firm started. George swore at the office-boys and his fellow-clerks for no apparent reason; and whenever he had occasion to make a remark naturally inoffensive, he seasoned it with unparliamentary expressions. He deftly mixed his obscenity with a good humour that was unmistakable, so that no person could say his language was anything but a vicious habit.

"This suits me down to the ground," thought George; "I should never have believed I could pick up anything so quickly; it's easier than learning French."

When George Early started on a thing he didn't do it by halves. In the present case he made such rapid progress that he was firmly convinced the following morning would see him proficient.

He remembered with pleasure that it was the

morning on which Joseph Fairbrother was to show some fair Sunday School teachers over the building. Nothing could be better. On their arrival he would drop some tame expletives sufficient to arouse the attention of the lady visitors; on their departure he would try something a little stronger. Some of them would be sure to point out his depravity to the principal, and as soon as that charitable gentleman began to keep his ears open George felt sure he could give him all the language he wanted.

That night the ambitious clerk wallowed in an atmosphere of profanity. He cursed the 'bus conductor and the 'bus driver, and the passengers, according to their size and fighting weight. He swore at every one who pushed against him, and a good many who didn't. He cursed dogs and telegraph-boys, and even lamp-posts. Once he nearly said something rude to a policeman, and only just pulled up in time to save himself.

His landlady objected to swearing, so George got through the evening meal quickly, and sallied forth to the saloon of a neighbouring inn. There he meant to go into training in earnest, and he hoped also to pick up a few choice expressions that would make a pleasant variation in the day's vocabulary.

He made a bad start by swearing at the landlord, who threatened to put him outside; but

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luckily a sailor came in and backed him up, and swore at the landlord himself in four different languages. After this George got along like a hot iron in fire.

His education advanced so rapidly that the next morning it was as much as he could do to speak without being offensive. He carefully laid his plans for the day as he rode to the City; he determined to put in a good morning's work about the office so that everybody might know swearing was his special vice, in case Old Joe made early inquiries; then he would spread the report that all his family used bad language, so that people might talk about it.

"Bit of luck I went to Billingsgate yesterday," he thought, as he jumped off the bus. "When I come into the five hundred I'll go down and find the chap who did me a good turn and give him a day out."

He sauntered into the office three-quarters of an hour late, and began to whistle a ribald tune as he took off his coat.

Somebody called out to him in a stage whisper. George took no notice, but swore at his hat when it dropped off the hook.

"Early," said the voice again. "Early!"

"Well, what the devil do you want?" said George, in a loud voice.

"S—sh!" cried the voice again, and George

looked round to see a group of solemn-looking faces.

"Hallo!" he cried, looking from one to another, "what's the trouble?"

"S—sh!" cried Busby, lifting his hand. "Mr. Fairbrother's dead."

"What?" cried George, aghast. "Well, I'm hanged!" he said, looking round at the group. "If that isn't just my luck!"

• • • • •

For the second time, George Early was unable to tackle his morning work. He could only sit gloomily at his desk and use up the language he had learned overnight in reviling Fate for treating him so scandalously.

Then he began to go over the events of the interviews again, and soon his countenance cleared so considerably that he was able to discuss the lamentable decease of the firm's head without a pang. Not only did his spirits rise, but they became positively hilarious towards mid-day; so much so that he shocked all those—and they were many—who felt gravity to be the order of the moment.

"Where's Polly?" asked George, as the lunch-hour approached. He was directed to the head clerk's private office, and into this he went at once, closing the door behind him. Parrott

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was busy with a sheaf of correspondence, and he looked up to see George Early standing easily a few yards away.

"Got a few minutes to spare?" asked George, coming forward, and leaning on the desk.

The head clerk frowned; he resented familiarity.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Oh, it's just a small matter," said George; "I want to borrow half a crown."

Parrott dropped the letters he was holding, and looked up in amazement.

"What?" he said faintly.

"Half a crown," said George; "I want to borrow one."

Parrott looked at George, and George looked at Parrott. Then Parrott put his hand slowly in his pocket, pulled out some coins, and put a half-crown on the edge of the desk.

George whipped it up, and put it in his pocket.

"Thanks, old chap," he said, and went out of the office whistling, while the head clerk sat staring at the half-open door like a man in a trance.

CHAPTER III—*George Early proves that Knowledge is Power*

THE firm of Fairbrother went on in the usual way after the loss of its head. There was some speculation as to who would succeed old Joseph Fairbrother, and a good deal of surprise when it turned out to be a daughter, a pleasant young lady of twenty-two or so, who arrived from Australia just before the funeral. If the old gentleman had timed his own death he could not have summoned his daughter with more precision. That the young lady was not steeped in grief at the loss of her parent must be put down to the fact, as confided to the head clerk, that she had lived in Australia the greater part of her life, and had scarcely known her father. More of her family history it is not necessary to tell here, except that, together with an aunt, she took up her residence at Brunswick Terrace, her father's comfortable West End residence.

Miss Ellen Fairbrother assumed command, and occupied the big office-chair much more frequently than "Old Joe" had done. There were no alterations in the staff, and no new rules. Miss Fairbrother was as quiet and in-offensive as her father, and seemed sensible of

the fact that she could not improve on his work. She therefore allowed things to go as they had been going.

Parrott and the other important members of the firm consulted the new chief, and jogged along in the same way before.

Nobody was different, except George Early. He alone had changed with the change of management. To be sure, three others had changed, but not in the same way. He was an ambitious young man, was George, and it seemed as though he had seen in this new state of affairs an opportunity for the advancement of no less a person than himself. That a casual observer might have assumed; a keen observer would have noticed that this change began at the moment when he left the private office with Parrott's half-crown in his pocket.

What the staff generally began to notice was that George had a great deal more confidence now than he had in the days of "Old Joe." He was less familiar with his fellow-clerks, and more chummy with his superiors. He never said "sir" to the head clerk, and the head clerk never found fault with anything he did. But as the clerks had a pretty easy time themselves, they did little more than merely notice these changes. Among those who were disturbed by George Early's tactics and who understood them better was Thomas Parrott.

For the first time in his life he had lent a man money without questioning his *bona fides*. The legacy compelled him to do it, and he did it. But no sooner had George got out of the office than the head clerk began to think over things, and to wonder if his nature would be able to stand the strain that it might be subjected to.

With the arrival of Miss Fairbrother, he withdrew to the small private office on the ground floor, and ventured out of it only when he was compelled. George made a note of this move, and on the whole quite approved of it; as things were about to shape themselves he could not have wished for anything better.

He walked in one morning, and closed the door carefully behind him. Parrott looked up with some uneasiness, but made no remark. He waited for his subordinate to speak; but as George Early seemed in no hurry to forego his inspection of the almanacks on the wall, he asked if Miss Fairbrother had arrived.

"Not yet," said George, without turning his head. "She doesn't hurry herself. No more would I if I had her job."

Parrott coughed sternly in reply to this free remark concerning the head of the firm.

"Do you want to see me, Early?" he asked, with an attempt at discipline.

"Oh yes," said George, as if obliged for the

reminder; "I was just going to thank you for that half-crown I borrowed. By the way, I'm a bit short this week; have you got five shillings you could let me have a couple of days? Beastly nuisance being short."

Parrott turned white, and nerved himself to bear the shock.

"What do you mean, Early, by coming here to borrow money from me?" he said.

George put his hand over his mouth and coughed.

"Because I know you're the right sort," he said diplomatically. "I know you've got a heart, and you wouldn't refuse a man who is hard up."

"It'll get round the office," said Parrott, "and I shall have everybody borrowing from me."

"Why should they?" asked George, innocently.

"Of course not," said Parrott, seeing the need for caution. "Well, I'll let you have the money this time, Early. You needn't tell anybody else; because if others started to borrow money from me, I should have to refuse everybody. Do you see?"

"I see," said George.

He pocketed the money and went out, leaving the head clerk in a very disturbed state of mind.

In spite of his impecunious state, George Early did not seek his usual coffee-shop for lunch

that day. He passed it by on the other side, and stopped to look at the bill of fare outside a City restaurant. Having examined the menus of other restaurants, he entered one where a man in uniform stood at the door.

Turning into an alcove, George came face to face with Gray, who was preparing to begin on a prime rump-steak. Gray started, and seemed anything but pleased to see George.

"Didn't know you came here," said George — "thought you went to the Plume of Feathers."

"I've given it up," said Gray.

"Best thing," said George. "It isn't nice to be seen going into a public-house, is it?"

Gray nearly choked himself with a piece of steak, and looked at his companion out of the corner of his eye.

"Smell of whisky here," said George, suddenly, eyeing Gray's glass. "They told me you'd signed the pledge."

Gray reddened, and affected not to notice.

"Better not go near the missis," said Early, referring to Miss Fairbrother. "Awful stuff to smell, whisky."

Gray was on the point of retorting, but changed his mind, and said—

"What are you going to have?"

"Nothing, thanks," said George, stiffly.

"Don't come any of that with me, please."

"What are you talking about?" said Gray, beginning to bluster.

"All right," said George, darkly; "that'll do. What I know, I know."

"What's the mystery?" asked Gray. "You'd better get it off your chest, if it's anything important."

"It is important," said George, with a frown. "And what I would do is to advise a certain party to be careful. I don't want to do any spying, but duty's duty."

Gray changed colour, and proceeded with his steak; while George buried himself in the columns of the *Daily Telegraph*, and preserved a countenance of Spartan-like severity.

Having finished his meal, George coolly took out a notebook and proceeded to make a few entries. He could see that Gray was watching him narrowly, and he purposely endeavoured to put more secrecy into the performance.

When it came to settling up, George had some difficulty in finding the cash, although it was only in his right-hand pocket.

"Funny thing," he said; "I had a half-sovereign a little while ago."

The waiter stood by stolidly with the bill on a salver.

"Would you care to take this?" said Gray, meekly, pushing forward a half-sovereign from

among his change. "I dare say you'll find it presently."

"Thanks," said George. "I'll settle up with that, and give it to you as we go along. I shall find it," he said in a determined voice.

He didn't find it. But Grav said it didn't matter; he could pay him back any time.

During the afternoon George Early was in excellent spirits, and when he left the office in the evening his usual fare of tea and toast was supplanted by a sumptuous meal at a foreign café, after which he avoided his usual haunts at Walworth, and travelled to the suburban retreat of Clapham. Here he sought out a quiet, respectable square, and stationed himself in the shadow of a doorway, opposite a corner house with railings. He remained patiently for a quarter of an hour, when the door of the corner house opened, and a man that might be easily recognized as Busby came out. Without hesitation Busby walked slowly across the square, turned down one street, up another, and across another, George Early following. Eventually Busby entered the Free Library, stayed a few minutes, came out, and walked off briskly in another direction.

George smiled to himself as he found Busby's destination to be a well-lighted billiard saloon. Having seen him safely inside, he turned away

and retraced his steps to the corner house in the square. This time he passed through the front garden, and rang the bell. A diminutive maid answered him, to be superseded by Mrs. Busby.

George Early inquired politely for her husband. He was not in, Mrs. Busby said. George knew that, but didn't say so. He simply said that he was one of Fairbrother's men, who happened to be in the district, looking for a house that was near the Free Library, and he thought his old friend might be able to give him some assistance.

"How funny!" cried Mrs. Busby. "Why, he's only just gone round to the Free Library himself. He spends all his evenings there, he's so fond of books! He will be sorry he missed you!"

"I'm sure he will," said George.

"What a pity you did not come a little earlier!" said Mrs. Busby.

"I would if I'd known."

"You see," said the little woman, "Albert is so studious. He'll sit for hours and hours in the library, reading all sorts of books, and he can tell the most wonderful stories. I don't suppose you'd believe them if you heard."

"I don't suppose I should," said George.

"Nobody does," said Mrs. Busby, with pride. "They hear his stories, and they smile, but they don't know where they came from."

"It's a good job they don't," thought George. Mrs. Busby gave her visitor elaborate directions for finding the library, and hoped he would come back to supper. George said he would be delighted, if it was only to hear some of her husband's stories.

Halfway across the square he turned round to take another look at the house. "Nice little woman that," he said to himself. "I think I'll go back to supper." He lit a cigarette, and started off to find his old friend Busby.

The cashier was in the midst of a game of billiards and winning easily, consequently he was in high spirits. He welcomed George, and wondered whatever had brought him to that district.

"House-hunting," said George. "I've just been round to the Free Library, looking up particulars."

At the mention of the Free Library, Busby became more serious, and the next shot he made was a bad one.

"You're getting on well," said George, looking at the score.

"So I ought," said Busby; "it isn't often I win. These beggars are too good for me."

"You'll win this time," said George; "that'll be good news for the missis."

Busby lighted his pipe to avoid a reply, and then made another bad shot.

"You've brought me bad luck," he growled, turning to George.

"It isn't that," said George, "you played in the wrong way. I was looking just now at the book on billiards in the Free Library, and——"

"Damn the Free Library," said Busby, savagely, making a miss.

Busby played badly for the rest of the game, and withdrew sulkily into a corner. George sat by his side, and endeavoured to cheer him up.

"What's wrong, old chap?" he asked. "You don't mean to say Mrs. B. will be disappointed because you lost?"

Busby gave him a pitying glance, and uttered these amazing words—

"She won't know anything about it."

George looked at him incredulously. "You don't mean to say you'll tell her you won?"

"Shan't tell her anything," said Busby. "She thinks I'm in the Free Library."

He was rewarded with a severe look from George, who said, in a serious tone—

"It isn't right, old chap; no man ought to deceive his wife. Tell the truth and shame the devil. That's my motto."

"Keep your motto," said Busby, rudely. "I don't want it. I bet you'd do the same if you were married."

"I wouldn't," said George, decidedly. "No, not for—not for £500 I wouldn't."

Busby was just raising a glass to his lips, but his hand began to shake so that he had to put it down. He mopped his brow, pulled out his watch, and thought it was about time he was getting home.

"Let's see, you're going the station way, I suppose?" he said when they got outside.

"I'm going your way," said George. "I'm coming home to supper, old man, to hear some of your stories."

"What?" roared Busby.

"Those you find in the books at the Free Library," said George. "I shall enjoy them, I'll be bound."

"Look here," said Busby, assuming a threatening attitude, "that's enough of it."

"No, it isn't, old chap," said George. "I promised the missis I'd come back with you from the Free Library, so, of course, I must. Besides," he added gravely, "I shall have to tell her you were not there."

Busby laughed hilariously. "You are a funny devil!" he said. "Well, good night."

He turned away, and George followed him closely. They went on in this way for twenty yards, when Busby turned, and said in low, fierce tones—

"You're following me. Now, I give you warning, Early. I've had enough of your nonsense lately. Take my tip and clear off while you're safe. You'll get none of our supper."

George folded his arms, and assumed a theatrical posture.

"Albert Busby," he said firmly, "it can't be done. I don't want your supper. I'm coming with you, Albert Busby, to see that—you—tell—the—truth."

Busby collapsed, and had to support himself against a lamp-post.

"What do you mean?" he asked faintly.

"I know all," said George, in sepulchral tones.

"All? All what?"

"You know what. I'm obeying the will of a dead man. Did you ever hear of Old Joe Fairbrother?"

That was enough for Busby. He turned away his head and gave vent to a groan.

"You don't mean to say he put you on my track?" gasped Busby.

George waved his hand. "The secrets of the dead must be kept," he said. "Ask me no more."

The next hundred yards were traversed in silence. They passed the Free Library just as the doors were closing, and turned off towards the square where stood the corner house with

railings. Suddenly Busby stopped in the middle of the pavement and put one hand on the arm of his friend.

"Early," he said, "you're not going to give me away, are you?"

George drew himself up. "The commands of a dead man——" he began.

"Stop that bosh," said Busby, irritably. "I don't want Fanny to know all about this; what are you going to tell her,—that's the question?"

"It isn't," said George; "the question is, what are you going to tell her?"

"She doesn't know all the facts of this business," said Busby, addressing a lamp-post on the other side of the road.

"She soon will," said George.

"She doesn't know it's five hundred," said the unhappy man; "she thinks it's fifty."

"Don't worry," said George; "I'll tell her everything."

"She thinks," he mumbled with a foolish laugh, "that Old Joe left me fifty pounds a year to improve my education, because I'm so studious!"

George laughed now. "I wonder what she'll say," he cried, "when I tell her the truth!"

Busby seized his wrist with dramatic savagery.

"She must never know!" he hissed.

"Let go my wrist, you silly fool!" cried

George; "you're pinching me. And don't breathe in my ear."

"She must never know," repeated Busby, folding his arms; "it would break up the home, and part us for ever. She couldn't bear to think I'd deceived her, and I dare say she'd waste away and break her heart. I should, too; and you'd be responsible for two deaths. Promise me, Early, that you'll keep your mouth shut, at least for to-night."

George covered his eyes with one hand and endeavoured to brace himself up for the effort.

"I'll try," he said nobly; "but I may break down in the morning; I can't be sure of myself."

"That won't matter," said Busby, "you won't be here then."

"I'm afraid I shall," said George; "you see, I unfortunately came out without any money to take me home, so I shall have to ask you to put me up for the night."

Busby viewed this prospect with cold disapproval, and after some discussion prevailed upon George Early to accept the loan of a half-sovereign to take a cab home. Having arrived at this satisfactory stage they entered the little front gate of the Busby cottage, George having insisted on keeping his appointment at supper.

Two hours later he left, accompanied to the front gate by his friend, whose hand he shook

repeatedly, finally waving him farewell across the square.

"What a nice man!" cried Mrs. Busby; "and how fond he is of you, Albert!"

Albert's answer was not distinguishable.

CHAPTER IV—*Three Worms that turned*

GEORGE EARLY came down to breakfast next morning half an hour after his usual time, blithely humming a tune. Mrs. Haskins had it on the tip of her tongue to say something caustic, but refrained.

"Quarter past eight," said George, looking at the watchmaker's over the way.

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs. Haskins. "I've done all I could to get you up in time. I'm only flesh and blood; I can't keep the time back."

"Tea hot?" said George, cheerfully ignoring this outburst.

"It was half an hour ago. It's been standing on the 'ob—boiled and stewed and the Lord knows what else. Just what I always do say——"

"Well, don't say it again," said George; "make some more. What's this—a kipper? Don't care for kippers this morning. Let's have some ham and eggs, and send Carrie out for the *Morning Post*."

"That's all, Mrs. Haskins," as the landlady hesitated. "Oh, stop a minute! I'll have a rabbit for dinner at seven sharp."

Mrs. Haskins stood by the door with the tea cosy in her hand and amazement on her face.

"Shall I write it down?" said George.
"Hain and eggs, *Morning Post*, rabbit."

He sat down in the armchair and put one foot on the mantelpiece, while Mrs. Haskins groped her way out of the room and slipped down the first flight of stairs.

"Parrot good, Gray good, Busby good. Yes," said George to himself with a smile of satisfaction; "it's the luckiest thing I've struck for many a day. This is going to be a picnic. They hadn't a word to say—not a word. Of course not. What could they say?" he asked a china dog on the mantelshelf. "Nothing."

He got up and looked out of the window. The jeweller's shop opposite looked a paltry, second-rate establishment. Hansoms crawling by the end of the street were merely things that you held up a finger to. What was a fur overcoat like that man had on over the way? "Fifteen hundred pounds a year!" said George in delicious contemplation. "Fifteen hundred golden sovereigns, and a dip in the lucky bag for yours truly. All prizes and no blanks!"

The *Morning Post* arrived.

"Hallo!" said George, "already? I suppose the breakfast 'll come up in course of time."

Carrie sniffed.

"You needn't put on airs," she said loftily.

"I suppose you think you're everybody because you're going to have rabbit for dinner."

"Look here," said George, with affected hauteur; "you mustn't speak to me like that: I never take impudence from maid-servants. If you're not careful I shall speak to your mistress, and then you won't get a character when you leave. Take your feet off the carpet."

Carrie giggled.

"What is it?" she asked; "five shillings rise, or some money left you? I'm particular to know, because I always like to treat people according to their position."

It was just a quarter past nine when George reached the office. Business was in full swing, and an air of concern appeared on the faces of several junior clerks as George Early hung up his hat. To be a quarter of an hour late was a crime many were guilty of, but to saunter in at nine-fifteen was tempting Fate.

"Missed your train?" asked Matthews, a sympathetic youth with freckles.

"Train?" said George; "don't be silly. My coachman overslept himself. Is she here?"

"Rather; got a new hat. Looks spiffing."

"I didn't ask about her hat," said George. "Where's Polly?"

"Upstairs in her office."

"Go and tell him I'm here, and ask if there's any telegrams for me."

Matthews was tickled at this display of humour, and told George that he'd got a nerve. He informed him that Busby and Gray had both arrived late; that Busby was in a beastly temper, but that Gray was in the best of spirits.

George smiled at the news concerning Busby. "It's that studying at the library," he said to himself facetiously. "No man can expect to keep his spirits up if he goes slogging away studying books, after putting in a full day at business. He wants recreation, a game of billiards, for instance. But that's the worst of these conscientious Johnnies; they get fifty pounds a year left them for study, and study they will, even if it means an early tomb."

Somebody went by, humming—

"For I am too diddley um tum tum,
And I am too diddley ay!"

"Hallo!" said George. "Who's going to be 'Queen o' the May' to-day?"

"That's Gray," whispered Matthews; "see him skip up the step?"

George turned in time to catch the graceful back-kick of a tweed leg as somebody disappeared through the door.

"Seems to have an elastic step this morning."

"It's the Leytonstone air," said Matthews; "you get it like that off Wanstead Flats."

"P'raps so," said George; "I don't think he got that off Wanstead Flats. I think I know where he got it."

"Where?"

"You get on with your work, and don't be inquisitive."

Gray's exuberance had calmed down towards the middle of the day, and when he started out in search of lunch his face wore a more thoughtful expression. The elasticity of his step was not at all noticeable, if it existed. It is doubtful if one in twenty of the people he met would have guessed that he had recently come into five hundred pounds a year, or even fivepence.

In Queen Victoria Street he stopped on the kerb-stone, and looked about him. Hungry clerks and typists flitted by in quest of milk and buns. Gray chinked his money and crossed the road. Before turning up a narrow side street he stopped again, and looked round. Then he carefully walked on.

On his left, three doors up, was a tea-shop. Gray looked in, and passed on. A couple of warehouses and a restaurant came next, and a narrow alley beyond. Gray turned into this alley, and followed its tortuous length for some distance until it emptied itself and Gray into a

sort of paved square, where the noise of traffic was reduced to a steady hum. There was one noticeable house in the square, a dull-looking building with a projecting lamp. People passed in and out. It was a public-house.

Instead of hurrying by with averted gaze, Gray stopped and glanced sideways at the bill of fare in a brass frame. He really hadn't the least curiosity to know what joints were on, and what entrées off, he was just asking himself a question which he couldn't answer. Another man had stopped to read the bill on the other door-post, and as he did so, Gray looked up. It was George Early.

For reasons best known to himself, Gray was angry.

"What the devil do you want?" he asked, addressing George.

"Want?" said George, surprised; "I'm looking at the bill."

"What do you want?" shouted Gray, fiercely, moving a step nearer.

"I want to be measured for a suit of clothes," said George, innocently. "This is a tailor's, isn't it?"

"This is a public-house," said Gray, in a low, murderous tone, "and you—you're following me."

A whisky bill stared George full in the face,

and his pleasant expression gave way to a look of concern.

"A public-house?" he said, stepping back. "Why, so it is. What's this, Gray? You don't mean to tell me you——"

"I tell you this," said Gray in a fierce whisper, thrusting his face close to George's; "if I catch you following me about——"

"Stop!" said the other, in commanding tones; "this is no laughing matter. You have said enough, Gray, and I have seen you with my own eyes." He pulled out a note-book.

Gray laughed ironically.

"Damn your note-books," he said. "I don't know what you're after, but I know that it'll take more than a silly cuckoo like you to upset me."

"Be careful," said George; "you know what lawyers are when they like to be nasty."

Gray thrust himself forward offensively. "I suppose you think you know something," he said, looking at the other man's eyebrows from a distance of two inches.

George Early's face expanded in a smile. "I do," he said.

"Oh?"

"Yes. But," said George, "I'm the only one in the firm who knows. Exclusive information, as they say."

"I see," said Gray, who had been deliberating.

"Well, look here"—he tapped George Early on the chest with one forefinger to emphasize each word—"I know something also, so that's two of us. You're a clever bantam, you are, but you'll have to get up a bit earlier to get over me. You just keep your eyes open, and see which of us gets tired first."

With that he marched off. George followed.

A tea-shop loomed up in the distance, and Gray entered and seated himself at a table. George went in and took a seat opposite.

For the rest of the day Gray made himself obsequious, frequently requesting George to keep an eye on him, and to have his note-book handy. He went out of his way to offer some points in detective work, particularly on the subject of tracking, and advised the purchase of a little book entitled "Nightingale Nick, the Boy Detective." This was not the worst. George observed Gray in close consultation with Busby, and afterwards with Parrott, both of whom adopted an attitude most aggressive.

"They're in league against me," thought the blackmailer.

This proved to be somewhere near the truth, for on endeavouring to negotiate a loan of five shillings from the head clerk that worthy smilingly replied that he would have been pleased to lend it if he had happened to have it, but the sum of

tenpence was all he possessed. He wouldn't think of refusing it, he would only ask George to wait till he got it out of the savings bank. He offered eightpence, keeping twopence for his fare home.

"That's the game, is it?" thought George.

Busby wouldn't speak at all. He replied to all questions by nods and other facial expressions. He shrugged his shoulders in a most expressive way when asked about the new books in the Free Library, and merely laughed when the subject of billiards was mentioned.

"After all, a man can't lie in a laugh," said George. "He can't lie if he doesn't speak. He's done me, and that's straight. Wait a minute"—brightening up—"I'd forgotten the missis. I've got him there safe enough."

"Old man," he said to Busby later in the day, "I'd forgotten to mention it, but the missis asked me to run over to supper again to-night. You can tell her to expect me at nine."

Busby found his tongue. "Well, fancy that!" he said, smiling and apologetic. "I'm sorry, old chap, she must have forgotten it."

"Why?" asked George.

"She went off to her mother's this morning for a month. What a nuisance! I'm awfully sorry. But, I say, Early, you can come down just the same, old chap. We'll have supper

together, and run over to the Free Library for an hour afterwards."

"Thanks," said George. "I will."

"That's right," said Busby, "do."

George didn't go, he went home to his rabbit dinner and abused his landlady in a most outrageous manner.

"In all my days," said Mrs. Haskins to her gouty aunt, "I've never been talked to like that. Bless my soul! if you ask me about it, I say let 'im get the *Morning Post* and take a flat in Kensington, and them as laughs last laughs most!"

George Early got to the office next morning at his proper time, surprising the staff as much as by his lateness the day before. His conduct throughout the day was most exemplary, and he bore the sneers of Busby and the taunts of Gray with meekness and resignation. Parrott found fault with his work, and went to the verge of bullying him. George obeyed his instructions, and knuckled under in a most abject manner, going so far as to call the head clerk "sir," and ask for a day off to bury his uncle.

"A day off!" said Gray, chuckling to himself; "I think he needs it. I like a man to come playing the old soldier with me, and think he's going to get off best."

Busby was highly gratified at the turn affairs

had taken. He had had to pay his wife's fare to her mother's, certainly, and give her a ten-pound note; but, taking into consideration Early's previous victory, things looked very promising.

Parrott said nothing, but as he saw George go meekly out of the office he smiled, which meant a very great deal, for Parrott only smiled on the most rare occasions.

CHAPTER V—*A New Lodger in Leytonstone*

ON the next day, as Gray left the office for Liverpool Street Station *en route* for Leytonstone, he ran into a man carrying a black bag.

"Hang you!" said the man. "Look where you're going."

"Your fault," retorted Gray, "stupid!"

"Who's that?" The man stopped. "Is that Jimmy Gray?"

"Why, it's Lambert," said Gray. "How are you, old man?"

They shook hands cordially, and slapped each other in the familiar old pal style.

"Why, what are you doing down this way?" said Gray.

"Jimmy," said the other eagerly, "you're the very chap I've been looking for. I wouldn't have missed you for anything."

"Funds low?" asked Gray.

"It isn't that," said Lambert.

He opened the black bag and drew forth a notebook that bulged with cards and bits of paper. One of the cards he placed in the hands of Gray.

"Society of Old Friends," read Gray. "A new social club for business men; secretary, Charles Lambert, Esq."

"Guinea a year," said Lambert, "and the membership complete all but one. Exceptional chance, Jimmy. Spacious club-rooms, billiards, and all the rest. Open as soon as members' list complete. My boy, it's a chance you ought not to miss."

"I know," said Gray; "they always are."

"Don't take my word," said Lambert. "Come and look for yourself. I'm off there now. Just by the G.P.O.—come along."

An hour later Gray resumed his walk to Liverpool Street, a member of the Society of Old Friends.

"That settles one thing," he said, as he got into the Leytonstone train. "Emily is sure to swallow this, and it'll give me a bit more time off."

Gray, like Busby, had not been quite honest with his wife on the subject of the Fairbrother legacy. As a matter of fact, at this moment she knew nothing whatever about it, and had not the faintest idea that her husband was one penny richer by the death of the head of the firm. Gray had intended that she should benefit, but, like many another cautious husband, he feared that sudden wealth might turn her brain. He would break it to her gently, at the rate of a pound a week at first. Having got thus far, he looked about for the best way of presenting the

legacy. No opening had presented itself until to-night, but he believed that he had at last solved the problem.

Mrs. Gray was on the doorstep when her husband arrived at the Leytonstone villa.

"How late you are, James!"

James replied by kissing her affectionately, much to her surprise.

"Couldn't help it, Em. One of the men away from the office and Harry had to stay.

"'Jimmy had to stay, my dear!
Jimmy had to stay!'"

he sang.

He was in a most amiable mood, a fact that would not have passed the notice of his wife if she hadn't happened to be in an amiable mood also. They sat down to a meat tea, and Gray attacked a steak vigorously.

"Jim," said Mrs. Gray, dimpling, and sipping a cup of tea, "what do you think?"

Gray arrested the progress of a piece of steak to his mouth, and said, "What?" keeping his mouth open, apparently to take in the answer with the meat.

"Guess," said Mrs. Gray, stirring the tea-leaves in the bottom of her cup.

"Can't," said Gray. "Anything the matter?"

"No, you old stupid," said his wife, placing

her cup firmly down in the saucer; "only that I have some good news, Jim."

"For me, dear?"

"Good news for both of us, Jim," said Mrs. Gray.

Gray smiled. "So have I, Emily. I've some good news for both of us also."

Mrs. Gray opened her eyes wide, and then pouted.

"Oh, you know all about it. You are a nasty thing."

"I don't know," said Gray. "I only know what I have to tell you, and that isn't what you have to tell me."

Sunshine again on Mrs. Gray's face. "Tell me your news, Jim," she said eagerly.

"Tell me yours first," said the sly Jim.

"No, Jim; do tell me yours."

"Well," said Gray, "I've had a glorious piece of luck. It hasn't come just at once; but I've been saving it up till I was sure that there was no mistake. There's a new club starting, dear, and I've got the secretaryship—worth about sixty pounds a year. Think of that—another pound a week income! Isn't it grand?"

"Splendid, Jim!" breathed Mrs. Gray.

"Of course," said Gray, hurriedly, "there'll be a lot of work, and I shall often have to stay there late in the evening. But I don't mind that,

so long as—so long as you have a little more money for yourself."

"Thank you, Jim dear; but I do hope you won't overwork yourself. But, I say, Jim, wait till I tell you my news; perhaps you won't need to work so hard, then. I've let the front room at last, Jim, and splendid terms—a pound a week, breakfast and meat tea, full board Sundays. Isn't that good?"

"Bravo!" cried Gray. "Why, I'm dashed if you haven't done as well as I have!"

"It's all settled," cried Mrs. Gray. "I only let it this morning, and the boxes came in this afternoon. Look!" She displayed two half-crowns in a plump little hand. "Deposit."

"You're a champion," said her husband. "We shall be so rich we shan't know what to do with the money. When does the old lady come in? Is she a widow?"

"Don't be stupid, Jim!"

Jim smiled. "Well, you know, dear, I thought——"

Mrs. Gray suddenly placed a hand over his mouth.

"That'll do, you wicked deceiver. Do you think you can play such games with me? As if I didn't know that you'd had a hand in it. You don't want me to thank you, you bad old Jimmy, but I shall."

"But, my dear——"

"Now, do be quiet," said Mrs. Gray. "I know all about it, so there! You were thinking how much I wanted a little extra money, and what a silly I was not to be able to let the room myself, and that's why you did it, now isn't it?"

Gray smiled, and tried to look as cunning as a monkey.

"I'm so glad," went on Mrs. Gray. "It will be such a help; especially as he's a nice man. I should hate to have a grumpy lodger."

"I hope he hasn't got a beard," said Gray. "I know you like beards, but I might get jealous."

"Don't be horrid, Jim; you know he hasn't got a beard."

"Perhaps his hair's red," continued the relentless Jim. "Now I come to think of it, you are rather partial to red hair."

"You know it isn't," said Mrs. Gray, with a pout. "You are a tease, Jim."

"How do I know," said Jim, innocently, "when I've never seen the man? He may be a Chinaman for all I know."

Mrs. Gray ignored this remark, and began to clear the tea.

"I like his name," she said presently.

"Glad of that," said her husband. "What is it—Piper or Snooks?"

"If your name wasn't Jim, Jim, I think I should like it to be George. George is the next best name to Jim."

"Oh, his name's George?"

"You know it is. And, Jim, supposing you two men——"

Mrs. Gray suddenly stopped talking, for her husband had risen from his chair with a terrible frown on his face. Before she could speak he caught her in a grip of iron.

"Why, Jim, whatever——"

"His name," he said, in a terrible whisper—"tell me his other name."

"Don't, Jim; you are silly——"

"Quick!" said Gray. "Name! name!"

Mrs. Gray gasped. "I don't—Jim——"

"Is it Early," said Jim; "George Early?"

"Of course. You must be crazy, going on like that!"

Gray released his hold and stared blankly at the carpet. Then he gave vent to his feelings in an outburst of invectives, which, being unintelligible to his wife, put that lady into a high state of indignation. What might have been a scene was dispelled by the rattle of a key in the front lock. Mrs. Gray swept out of the room, and a minute later her husband and George Early had the sitting-room to themselves.

"Good evening," said George, sweetly.

"Good evening," said Gray.

There was silence for a while, during which time Gray rammed a pipe with Old Judge. George selected a comfortable armchair, and lit a cigarette.

"So you've been burying your uncle," said Gray, with a sneer. "I hope you buried him deep."

"Pretty deep, thanks," said George.

Gray planted his back to the fireplace, and looked sideways at his enemy.

"I hope it's a big grave," he said, "in case there's another death in the family."

"There won't be another death," said George; "we're pretty hardy."

"You're a clever devil," said Gray, in a tone that belied his words. "If all the family are as clever as you, they'll be in Parliament soon—or jail. I suppose you think you've got the best of me; but you'll find that two can play at this game."

"That's what I thought," said George. "It was because I couldn't get along without you that I came down here."

Gray accepted the situation for the time being with sullen resignation, and Mrs. Gray, entering the room timidly and finding the new lodger in good spirits, brightened up and forgot her husband's outburst. In half an hour George knew

all the local news and scandal, and was on the best terms with Mrs. Gray, if not with her husband.

"Do you know," said Mrs. Gray, "at first I had a horrid thought that you and Jim were not friends. Wasn't it silly of me?"

"Absurd," said George. "We're like brothers."

"Ah," said Mrs. Gray, "but there's one thing you don't know. Jim only heard it for certain to-day."

"That's nothing," said Gray, suddenly; "he knows all about that."

"Oh, you mean——" said George, looking at his landlord.

"Where are my slippers?" bawled Gray, irritably, suddenly groping about the fireplace. "They're never here when——"

"I'll get them, Jimmy!" Mrs. Gray skipped away to the kitchen.

"Not a word, mind," said Gray, in a fierce whisper to George. "I won't have that business discussed here. I'm secretary to the 'Old Friends' Society,' at sixty pounds a year. That's good enough for you."

"It's good enough for you, I suppose you mean," said George.

"Well, remember—not a word."

"I'm not sure that I should be doing right——"

"You fool, do you want to ruin me? I haven't told her yet, and I can't let her hear it from you."

"Why not?" asked George.

"You ass!" said Gray, excitedly. "I can't explain here. I don't want her to know."

"Quick!" said George, as Mrs. Gray's footsteps sounded in the passage; "shake hands, and I'll keep your secret."

The pair grasped hands dramatically.

"Yes," said Mrs. Gray; "it's a splendid thing for Jim, isn't it?"

"Splendid thing for the club," said George. "They know what they're about; you can take my word for it. Where could they find a man, I should like to know, with the ability, the splendid gifts, and the remarkable knowledge of your husband? He's a man," said George, fixing a keen eye on the paper Gray was reading "he's a man in a thousand. An orator, a politician, a scientist, a man of the world. His intellect——"

"That'll do," snapped Gray.

"No," said George, "I won't stop. Why should I? The position is a big one; but you are as good as the position."

"That's what I say," said Mrs. Gray, who approved of all George said.

"They're getting a man," went on George,

"who will fill an honourable position with honour. The right man, too. For secretary you must have a man who is punctual, a teetotaler, and——"

"Oh, but Jim isn't——"

"Don't interrupt, Emily," said Gray, irritably; "you know what he means."

"But he said——"

"Oh, don't argue! What's the time? I want to run out for half an hour. I suppose you'll come as far as the corner—er—George?"

"Jimmy, old friend," said George, with an affectionate glance, "you know I will."

The next morning George and his landlord travelled to town together. Gray didn't take at all kindly to the new arrangement, but gave vent to his feelings in sudden outbursts of profanity.

"I suppose I'm going to have you hanging to me like a leech as long as I've got a penny in my pocket," he said bitterly.

George looked hurt. "It's your company I want, Jimmy," he said meekly. "A bachelor wants a cheerful pal. You ought to know that, you've been a bachelor yourself."

"You'll have to clear out," said Gray, darkly. "I won't have you in my house, I tell you straight."

There was an absence of sprightliness in Gray's manner at the office that day. He sat

in gloomy solitude at his desk, nursing his wrath. All efforts on the part of Busby to draw him into conversation were useless. George, on the contrary, was in good spirits, so cheerful, in fact, that Parrott and Busby began to feel a little uncomfortable.

"He's up to some mischief," thought the head clerk. "I shall have to keep my eye on him." His fears were confirmed a little later on in the afternoon. The freckled Matthews entered his office and asked permission for one of the carmen to speak with him.

"Who is it?" asked Parrott.

"Old Josh. Wants to see you particularly."

Old Josh was ushered in—a little tubby, weather-beaten old man with a squeaky voice. He entered at once into a recital of family woes, in which his son-in-law, who was out of work, figured prominently. Before his daughter married the family had been comfortably off—always had a good dinner on Sundays, never knew what it was to want a shilling; week in and week out there was the money; and there were they all happy and comfortable. His son-in-law had had bad luck, and that bad luck meant help from the old people, and the worry of it had made the missis ill; and, what with one thing and another, the family funds had fallen low, there was rent in arrears, and things had come to a crisis.

"Well," said Parrott, "I'll see what I can do, but of course, you know, you're getting the highest limit of wages the firm allows. Perhaps I may be able to make it another shilling. I'll see what I can do, Benson."

Benson murmured his thanks, and proceeded to launch forth into a fresh budget of troubles.

"Very well," said Parrott, nervously. "I'll let you know as soon as I've seen Miss Fairbrother."

Old Josh twirled his cap for a moment and then said—

"The fact of it is, sir, you see, it ain't so much the shilling a week, which is welcome, though small. It's the present needs, as you may say, that knocks us over."

"I see," said Parrott, plunging into the perusal of a pile of papers. "Well, I'll be sure to let you know."

Old Josh then made an effort and blurted out: "A party told me, sir, as how the present needs might be put right by a certain sum o' money down, which I may say would be a fi' pun note. I make bold, sir, to ask you for the loan of that sum, which will be a God-send and a generous action."

Parrott turned pale and stared. "What's that you say?"

"A matter of five pounds, sir," said old Josh

"If my son-in-law had done as I told him, it wouldn't have been for me, sir——"

"Never mind your son-in-law, I'm very busy just now," said Parrott.

"Then I suppose it's no good my——"

Parrott waved his hand. "You'd better come—come and see me later. I can't talk now."

Old Josh went off highly gratified, with many apologies for the disturbance. The next person to enter was George Early, summoned by special messenger.

"Early," said the head clerk, "your work has been very unsatisfactory lately, and although you've been warned several times it doesn't seem to improve. You set a bad example to the others, and I feel it my duty to bring this matter to a close. You are a smart young fellow, but you don't quite suit the firm. I dare say you will be valuable to somebody else, so I set you at liberty a week from now."

"Thanks," said George; "then it's no good asking for a rise in salary?"

"You are dismissed," said Parrott.

"How did Old Josh get on?" asked George, complacently.

"I have nothing further to say," said the head clerk, firmly. "You may go back to your work."

"Thanks again," said George; "but I have something further to say. I may be valuable to

another firm, but I prefer to remain here. That's because I'm a smart fellow, as you say. I don't want to be hard on you, but I can't have any nonsense like this, so I may as well say so at once. The bad example I set to others I have had under consideration, and I find that my abilities are wasted in the ordinary clerking. I've therefore decided to talk over with you the matter of taking a higher position, where I shan't have to sit with ordinary clerks and corrupt 'em. I needn't explain to you that it will be to your advantage to help me up, because a man with your foresight will see that at once. Just you think it over, and we'll have a little confab in a day or two."

He went out of the office and closed the door softly.

At the week-end George heard that Miss Fairbrother was thinking of taking a secretary, and had cast a favourable eye upon himself, assisted in the operation by the head clerk.

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CHAPTER VI—*Lamb Chops and Tomato Sauce*

THOMAS PARROTT was treating himself to half an hour's serious meditation, selecting for his purpose the big armchair in Mrs. Carey's sitting-room. It was only on Wednesdays that the sitting-room was deserted, because then the two other lodgers were detained at business, and Parrott was free to have his dinner in solitude. With Mrs. Carey's permission, he took his dinner on Wednesdays in the company of Miss Lucy Perkins, the future Mrs. Parrott.

It was nearly seven now, and Miss Perkins was due in half an hour. The head clerk had intended to take advantage of the comfortable legacy left him by setting up an establishment of his own. It had been his intention to fix the wedding day the week before, and thus bring to a close his forty years of bachelorhood; but he had put it off; under the circumstances he was uncertain how to act.

The cause of the disquiet was the pecuniary demands of George Early, who had developed a habit of borrowing that had become alarming. The first half-crown had lengthened into five shillings, which in turn became ten; the previous

day had seen a rise to a sovereign. Parrott had remonstrated, but remonstrance was lost upon the imperturbable George, who remarked that it was only out of kindness he had been persuaded to cut the sum so low. He said that he hoped the small loan would not be refused, as it would give him pain to have to report the matter to the lawyers, who evidently wanted rousing up. He then pointed out to Parrott that he was really doing him a service, by helping him to break his beastly habit of meanness.

"I could get him the sack," thought the head clerk. "That would be one way to get rid of him."

He strangled the idea a moment afterwards. George Early out of work would be an even greater danger. He thought out various plans of bribery, intimidation, kidnapping, and even garrotting, but none of these suggested a possible solution. In the midst of his meditations the front-door bell rang.

"That's Lucy," said the head clerk, rising and smoothing down his hair before the glass. "I mustn't say anything to-night. It'll have to be postponed till I can be sure the money is my own."

He brushed a speck off his well-preserved dress-suit and flicked over his shoes. Then he stirred the fire and went to meet his *fiancée*.

As he opened the door a well-known voice caught his ear. It was not Lucy's; it was a man's voice. He knew it well; it was George Early's voice.

"Damn him!" said Parrott, savagely. "What the deuce does he want now? I'll wring his neck if he tries to borrow more money already!"

George was speaking most affably to Mrs. Carey.

"I'll just tell Mr. Parrott that you're here," said the fussy old lady.

"Thank you," said George; "and I'll come with you. It's most fortunate that he's at home. I know he wouldn't like to have missed me."

The head clerk looked around him frantically. There was no escape; he was caught like a rat in a trap. He felt that he would sooner have brained the relentless George than lend him a single sixpence. He rushed to the window; it was too high to jump from, and already George was on the landing. A sudden idea struck him, and he picked up his patent boots and dived into the great clothes-cupboard that opened into the sitting-room.

Mrs. Carey knocked and entered, followed by George.

"A gentleman to see——"

The landlady stopped and looked round.

"Not here?" said George.

"Well, now," said Mrs. Carey, "bless my soul, I could have bet a penny-piece I heard the poker rattle five minutes ago!"

"I heard a rattling noise," said George.

In the minute or two that Mrs. Carey occupied in ascending a further flight of stairs to the bedroom Parrott debated whether he should spring out and throttle his enemy or await events. At any rate, George must go when he found the man he wanted was not at home. He decided to stay awhile in the cupboard.

Mrs. Carey returned from a fruitless search. She thought her lodger must have run out to post a letter.

"I'll wait a bit," said George.

He placed his silk hat carefully on the side table, and took a seat in the armchair vacated by the head clerk. Parrott fumed as he took note of George Early's dress through a crack of the door. His patent boots were new, and he wore an expensive tie; sprays of flowers worked in silk adorned his waistcoat; his gloves were a fashionable grey, and on the little finger of his left hand a ring glittered.

These articles of dress were not lost upon Mrs. Carey, who took advantage of George's affability to stand a moment and comment on the weather. Their pleasant chat was interrupted by another ring at the front-door bell.

"Hang it!" muttered the wretched Parrott. "That's Lucy, and I can't get out of this beastly hole!"

Instead of Mrs. Carey descending to show up the young lady, she allowed Susan, the maid-of-all-work, to do that service, and explained to Miss Perkins the reason of her presence with the gentleman visitor.

Miss Perkins thought it funny that Mr. Parrott should not be there to meet her, and by the toss of her head George guessed that she was not a little piqued. Mrs. Carey left them together till the return of the absent *fiancé*.

Miss Perkins was a milliner by trade, but not in trade at present. Fortune had smiled upon her mamma a year previously to the tune of two thousand pounds, and with this comfortable sum Mrs. Perkins lived in a villa at Paddington until such time as Thomas Parrott should rob her of her child. Both mother and daughter considered the match a desirable one, though they would have liked to know with more certainty the extent of the head clerk's fortune.

"Do you find it very warm here?" said George, making himself agreeable. "Let me open the window just a little."

"It might be cooler," said Miss Perkins, dabbing her face with a handkerchief.

"That's the worst of these old houses," said

the young man, magnificently ; "they're so pokey. The rooms are like rabbit hutches."

"Give me Kensington for a decent house," said Miss Perkins, trying to look as though she lived there.

"Or Bayswater," said George.

"I couldn't bear to live in a part like this," said Miss Perkins. "I always did 'ate 'Ammer-smith."

From unhealthy houses they drifted into more personal topics, and George told Miss Perkins that he was a member of the firm of Fairbrothers. They discussed the ornaments and the furniture, examined the pictures, and laughed together at the family likenesses. And to all appearances they didn't seem to mind much if Parrott came back or not.

Then, for decency's sake, George said, "He's a long time posting that letter," to which Miss Perkins agreed without appearing to be much disturbed.

And while they were both chattering and laughing Mrs. Carey came up and vowed upon her life that the lamb chops would be ruined. There was tomato sauce too, and a pudding, specially prepared to the order of the head clerk. It was a shame to have it spoilt, Mrs. Carey said, and both Miss Perkins and George Early agreed.

Unfortunately, Thomas Parrott had left lying

on the side table an invitation to dinner that he had declined the day before. George pounced upon it and read it out.

"That's where he's gone," said Miss Perkins, viciously.

"It's a shame," cried Mrs. Carey.

"I'm surprised," said George, "that any man should so far forget himself as to leave a lady in this awkward position. If it wasn't that I'm a stranger here I should feel inclined to ask Mrs. Carey to allow me to do the honour of——"

He hesitated and looked at Miss Perkins, who began to toy with a salt-spoon.

"Of course," said Mrs. Carey, accepting the situation graciously, though a little uneasily. "If Mr. Parrott wouldn't mind, I'm sure I—— It does seem a pity to have the dinner wasted."

"It would be a sin," said George.

He looked at his watch and began to brush his hat, and perform those little preparations that preface departure, maintaining in the mean time an indifference likely to settle quickly the doubts of Mrs. Carey.

"I'll bring it up," said the landlady, suddenly opening the door. "Don't go till you've had a bit of dinner, sir. I'll explain it to Mr. Parrott."

Mrs. Carey bustled downstairs, and George and Miss Perkins prepared themselves for a pleasant evening.

The dinner was an immense success. The only thing that saved it from disaster was the horror that Parrott had of bringing ridicule upon himself. But for this the irate prisoner would have burst the door of his prison-house and brought confusion on the diners.

George filled Miss Perkins' glass and his own to the brim. He had discovered a full bottle of claret in the cupboard, and brought it out in honour of the lady. Together they emptied the bottle, and enjoyed it; the lamb chops disappeared, and Mrs. Carey's puddings followed them, and throughout the evening they seasoned each course with a natural good humour.

George was in the best of spirits. He praised the cooking, compared the sparkling wine to Miss Perkins' eyes, and attacked the food with a relish that only comes to a man when he is feasting at another man's expense.

"You may smoke," said Miss Perkins, graciously, settling herself in an armchair.

George did so, borrowing for the time one of the head clerk's cigars, with the permission of that gentleman's *fiancée*.

The sight of his beloved on one side of the fire and his enemy on the other was too much for Parrott. Already his cramped position had exhausted him, he began to scheme for some means of escape.

George now shifted his position, so as to put his back to the light, at the same time putting his back to the cupboard. If only Lucy would do the same, he might slip out and down the stairs, the cupboard being near the door.

The next moment she did so, and, quick as lightning, Parrott opened the door noiselessly, and put one foot out. Unfortunately for him, George was standing before the looking-glass, and this movement caught his eye. In the excitement of the moment he dropped the china dog he was examining, which so startled Miss Perkins that Parrott was forced to draw back for fear of being observed.

George gathered up the pieces, and began to laugh. The idea of Parrott being in the cupboard while the lamb chops were being eaten was too good to be passed over lightly, it gave a new zest to the entertainment.

"What are you laughing at?" asked Miss Perkins, still suffering from the shock.

George laughed louder. "I was thinking," he said, "how your *fiancé* will laugh when he comes home and asks for the lamb chops for supper, and finds they're eaten."

This tickled Miss Perkins immensely, and she and George laughed again in unison.

"Serve him right," said Miss Perkins.

"What does it matter?" said George,

throwing away his cigar, and taking a fresh one.

"What does what matter?" asked Miss Perkins.

"About the chops, when he's got you."

To this embarrassing question Miss Perkins vouchsafed no reply, merely adopting an air of superiority, and tapping the toes of her shoes together.

"If I were in his position," said George, loud enough for the man in the cupboard to hear, "I'd get married to-morrow."

Miss Perkins blushed, and laughed. "You wouldn't be so silly," she said.

"Anyhow, I'd marry you at once," said George, "just to make sure"—slowly—"that I didn't lose you."

Miss Perkins, who was now in an excellent temper, changed the conversation by wondering what time Mr. Parrott would return.

"He'd be back sharp enough if he knew you were here," said George.

"With you," added Miss Perkins, with pretty wit.

This made them both laugh.

"I wonder what he'd think if he'd been hidden away here all the time," said George, audaciously.

Miss Perkins turned pale, and looked round the room.

"It's all right," said George; "it's only my fun."

The little milliner tossed her head. "I shouldn't care," she said defiantly.

"I don't believe you would," said George, with admiring eyes. "But I know what you would say. You'd just say this."

He leaned forward, and whispered.

Miss Perkins shrieked with laughter, and George's loud guffaw shook the ornaments. It was as much as Parrott could do to keep his feelings under control. Even now he had notions of dashing from his hiding-place. Early would go too far one of these times; he was doing this purposely.

"I say," said George, suddenly, "when is the wedding coming off? I suppose you've got the house all ready."

"Not quite," said Miss Perkins, with some reticence.

"Oh," said George, "I thought it would be all right, seeing that his luck at the office had changed."

Miss Perkins pricked up her ears.

"You know all about that, of course," said George, warming up to the subject, and watching the door of the cupboard out of the tail of his eye.

"No," said Miss Perkins astonished, "what was that?"

"Why, you see," said George, "it was this way."

He paused to relight his cigar, and carefully noted the brawny fist that came slowly out of the cupboard and shook in his direction.

"When Old Fairbrother died——" began George.

The cupboard door creaked. Miss Perkins heard it, but was too excited to take any notice.

George began again. "When Old Fairbrother died, he left——"

An audible rustling now came from the cupboard.

"What's that?" said Miss Perkins. "I heard something."

"So did I," said George. "Whatever can it be?"

"Perhaps it's a cat," ventured Miss Perkins.

"Sounded just like a cat to me," said George.

Miss Perkins lifted up a corner of the tablecloth, and knelt on the floor to peer under the table. George lifted up another corner, and knelt beside her. Together they looked underneath, and all that Parrott heard were muffled voices and a little giggle from his *fiancee*.

When they both rose, very red in the face, Miss Perkins cried "oh!" and it was then seen that George's watch chain had become entangled

in the lace of her sleeve. When Miss Perkins tried to undo it her head came very near to George Early's, and Parrott gnashed his teeth. Only the thoughts of absolute disgrace kept him in his narrow cell.

"What a good thing he isn't here to see this!" breathed George.

"It was your fault," said Miss Perkins, stifling a laugh; "your——"

"Listen," said George. "I heard it again."

They listened, but there was no sound.

"Perhaps it's under the table, after all," said the young man artfully. "I only looked in one corner."

The brawny fist again appeared from the cupboard door.

"I think I'll go now," said Miss Perkins, apparently aware at last that a flirtation was in progress, and that the landlady had ears.

"If there is anybody concealed here," said George, lifting up a corner of the tablecloth again, "I pity him when Mr. Parrott comes in. If there's one thing that he can't bear, it's deception of any sort. Goodness knows what he'd do to anybody who deceived him! I believe he'd kill him."

Miss Perkins put on her hat in silence, and with some haste. If her lover came in, matters might be awkward.

"You are going to Paddington, I think," said George; "we'd better have a cab."

"No, thank you," said the little milliner, doubtful how to act; "I'm not quite sure if Thomas would like it."

"Ah," said George, with a catch in his voice, "you don't know him as well as I do. It's the very thing he'd suggest. We're just like brothers, the two of us; we lend each other money, wear each other's clothes, go to each other's houses, and do everything we can for each other. If he wanted my girl, I——"

"What!" said Miss Perkins, sharply.

"If he wanted anything—anything——" said George.

"You said a girl," said Miss Perkins.

"Ah, I only said 'if'!" replied George. "But you may be sure that if he were here now, he'd say, 'George, my old friend, take Lucy home in a cab. You're my comrade, and I'd trust you anywhere.'"

Miss Perkins said no more, but led the way downstairs, and as George followed, he heard the door of the cupboard creak, and knew that the prisoner was at last free.

An hour later he returned, and inquired for the head clerk again.

"I don't think he's in yet," said the landlady; "I haven't heard him."

"I think you'll find he's in," said George.

Mrs. Carey found the head clerk in, much to her astonishment, and ushered George up, after having hastily explained the lamb-chop incident.

"Hallo, old man!" said George, closing the door carefully, and choosing an armchair. "Hard luck for you being shut up there, wasn't it?"

Parrott rose slowly, and deliberately took off his coat.

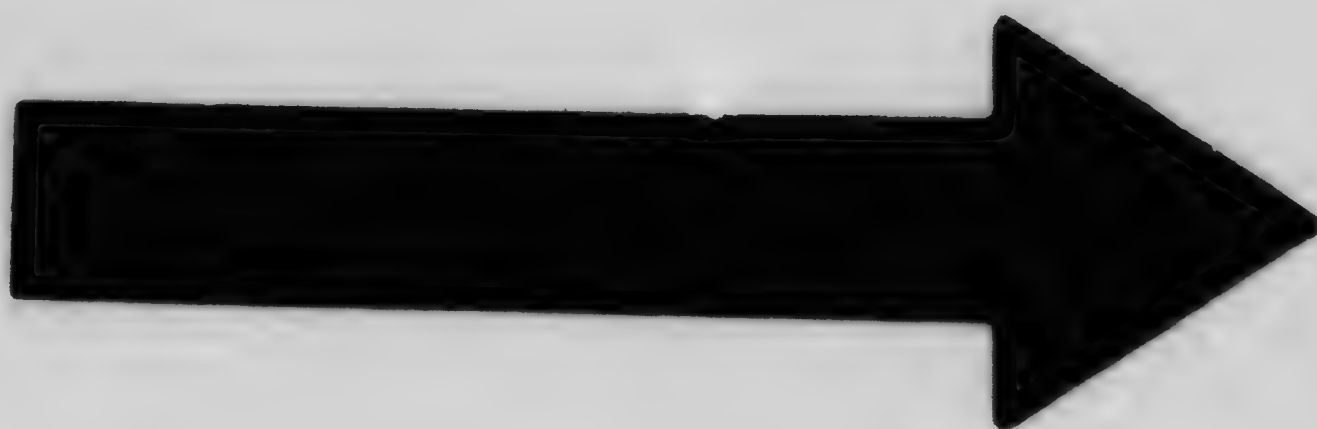
"Now," he said, facing his junior, "what have you got to say about it?"

George Early lit a cigarette, threw the match away, and then looked up.

"What I have got to say," he said slowly, leaning forward, and looking the head clerk in the eyes, "is that if you don't put on that coat at once and sit down, I'll—I'll borrow ten pounds!"

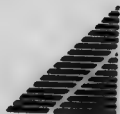
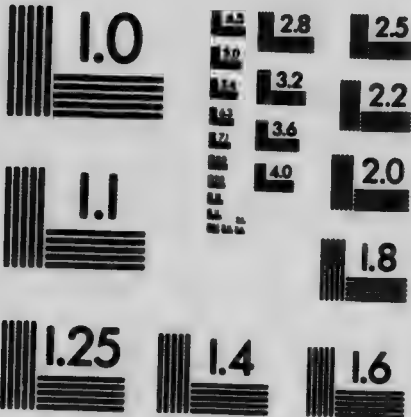
"What!" said Parrott, in a hoarse whisper.

"I mean it," said George.



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CHAPTER VII—*An Erring Husband improves against his Will*

GEORGE EARLY certainly showed some shrewdness when he took up his position as secretary to Miss Fairbrother, for his address and appearance underwent a process of swift renovation. He brushed his hair very nicely, shaved every morning, and attuned his voice to the ear that was to receive its melody during business hours.

Miss Fairbrother approved of George; he was neither uncouth nor dense like a good many other men who are clerks. He knew just when to be formal, and when his business features might relax into a smile. Nothing embarrassed him. He took over the little problems of the big office and smoothed them out comfortably—not by himself, but by the help of other men downstairs. When something puzzled Miss Fairbrother, as most business affairs did, George immediately cleared the air by affirming that Gray or Busby or Parrott could explain it, and to Gray or Busby or Parrott George went. Letters, orders, bills, complaints, came up daily to the desk of the fair employer, laying the foundation of many a thin line on the white brow; letter, order, bill, and complaint were picked up and

laid down by turns, jumbled, mixed, and sighed over. Then the little bell would tinkle, and from his office adjoining in would come George, bright-eyed, confident, and submissive. Could he understand to what this letter referred? Miss Fairbrother didn't remember the matter. This complaint about stoves. Who was responsible for the delay, and was it usual to allow discount in this other case, as the customer asserted?

George didn't know; but if you think that George was fool enough ever to admit it, you have quite mistaken his character. George would attend to all these matters, and see that everything was put right. He did so too, and took upon himself a good deal of authority downstairs, which was his peculiar way.

"A man might rise to a good position here," he said to himself, flicking a speck off his fancy waistcoat. "There is nothing going downstairs; it's up here where the salary is, and the good jobs and all the rest of it. Besides, feminine society is much more in my line. Women are so much more easy to manage—in business. Who knows, some day I may be giving a rise to others: you never—— Come in!"

"Gentleman to see Miss Fairbrother."

A large man of the country builder type tramped in.

"You want," said George, with the air of one

about to confer a favour, "to see Miss Fairbrother?"

"That's it, m'lad. Shall I go in?"

"If you will be so kind as to sit down," said George, with affability, "I will find out if the lady can see you. Our busiest time this; four people inside now."

"I know, I know, my lad. I have been dealing here this thirty year."

"Really?" said George.

"Yes," said the builder. "I knew your missis when she was a little 'un, two year old. They tell me she's grown a fine lass."

"She has," said George. He went inside.

Miss Fairbrother was engaged in the un-businesslike occupation of looking over a pile of draper's patterns.

"A gentleman to see me? Joseph Brown, —I don't know the name. What does he want?"

"Wants to gossip and give a small order, I should say," said George.

"I suppose you may send him in," said Miss Fairbrother, abstractedly, feasting her eyes upon a square figured watered silk. "Is he a nice man?"

"Harmless," said George; "but probably a talker. He's been dealing here thirty years. Old acquaintance, he says."

"Oh!" said Miss Fairbrother, looking up, "what else did he say?"

The ghost of a smile lit up George's face.

"Said he knew you when you were—so high." He gave a guess at the height of a two-year-old girl.

Against her will, Miss Fairbrother's face flushed. She looked doubtfully at the door, then at the patterns, and said—

"Please say I'm very busy. Perhaps you can settle the matter yourself; I really am busy, you know," and she pulled a fresh box of patterns from under the desk, and spread them out before her.

After some trouble George convinced Joseph Brown that the four customers inside would occupy Miss Fairbrother's attention for at least two hours, and advised him to call again.

Miss Fairbrother spent the rest of the day in poring over the pages of fashion-books, leaving George to wrestle with the problems of the firm in the shape of business correspondence.

"Lucky thing she's got a good business staff," mused George. "The old man knew what he was doing when he tied those three beggars to the firm with five hundred pounds each. Not but what he might have found better men—myself, for instance. However, I mustn't grumble."

George did not grumble; on the contrary, his good humour was inexhaustible, and his temper as even as a man's temper could be, considering that he held a position of responsibility. He worked now much more than he had ever worked before; but it may safely be assumed that he was not doing it for the fun of the thing; that there was money in it, or that he did it with a purpose; in other words, that he knew what he was about.

So far as the legatees were concerned, Miss Fairbrother's secretary did not see fit to relax his vigilance. Perhaps he felt that the apathy of "Old Joe's" lawyers made it necessary in the interests of justice that a private person should take up the case, or perhaps he found it useful to have the men under his thumb; whatever his reasons were it is certain that his eyes were as watchful as ever, and equally certain that his victims strongly disapproved of his attention.

"It's my duty," he said to Gray, when that gentleman brutally asked how long he intended to intrude upon his home comforts.

"Hang your duty!" said Gray; "we don't want you."

"I'm a good lodger," said George; "ask your wife if I don't give complete satisfaction. She hasn't grumbled, that I'm aware of. You

know you've always wanted a lodger, and now you've got one you're not satisfied."

Gray was certainly a long way from being satisfied. Since the advent of George Early his home had become as sanctimonious as an A.B.C. shop. He was obliged to conduct himself according to the creed of the new lodger, who held over his head the grim sword of exposure. He came home early when George willed it, and attended to his duties as secretary of the Old Friends' Society when George saw fit to grant him an evening off.

Mrs. Gray was just as pleasant with the new lodger as her husband was annoyed with him. Gray had had a partiality for Scotch whisky that had at times left much in his character to be desired as a husband. His wife confided this much to George, who promised to lead the erring husband from his wicked ways. He was as good as his word, and in due course the whisky bottle disappeared. Other bad habits of Gray's also were toned down considerably, and James Gray's wife was not slow to show her appreciation by holding up George Early as a model young man, and an excellent lodger.

"My time will come," said Gray, savagely, to George; "and when it does I shan't forget you."

"I hope not," said George, "I've been more than a brother to you."

Elated by the growing fortunes of the family, and the reformation of her husband, Mrs. Gray proceeded to lay out the extra cash that flowed into the family coffers in new strips of oil-cloth and art muslin. In her pursuit of these useful articles she kept a watchful eye on the local drapers' sales, and joined the mad rush that followed the opening doors on the first day. Fancy curtains of weird colours greeted the eyes of her husband in all parts of the house, and odd forgotten corners sprang into new life under a mantle of carpet remnants.

George Early's bedroom was not neglected, and, in order to show her gratitude for the good he had done, Mrs. Gray determined to surprise him by gracing that virtuous apartment with a brand new bookshelf, on which the dozen odd volumes of his leisure might repose with dignity.

With this object in view, she started out one morning to Stratford, hugging a catalogue wherein it was stated that among other things "bookshelves of artistic design" were to be "absolutely thrown away."

In due course Mrs. Gray reached the scene of battle, and joined the great throng of combatants all eager for the fray. It was a mighty crowd, but Mrs. Gray, who knew something of Stratford and its inhabitants, was convinced that the five-shilling mantles, skirts, and blouses would

engage their attention before books and bookshelves. Her reckoning, wise as it may seem, was somewhat out; as she discovered when, hot and panting, she reached the bookshelf counter. They had sold like hot cakes. One solitary bookshelf, abashed at its loneliness, and still bearing the glaring red sale ticket, reposed on the long counter.

"Bookshelves," gasped Mrs. Gray to the nearest assistant.

"Here you are, ma'am, the last one."

"Oh! Haven't you any others?"

The crowd surged, and it was only by an effort that little Mrs. Gray got back to the counter.

"Bookshelves," she gasped again to the perspiring draper.

"Last one, better have it while you can," said the man.

"Oh, well, I——"

"How much is this bookshelf?" said a voice.

Mrs. Gray's hand grasped it convulsively.

"This is sold," she cried; "I've bought it."

"I beg pardon, ma'am, I didn't hear you say——"

"I spoke first," said the other lady, laying a hand on the bookshelf; "you've no right——"

"Excuse me——"

"It's no use talking, I——"

"But I was here first, before you ever——"

"Take the money, please, one and——"

"Do nothing of the sort. I've already bought——"

"Now ladies, ladies, ladies!" cried the assistant.

"But you know——" began Mrs. Gray indignantly to the man.

"How ridiculous! You heard me say I'd have it. Why——"

"You didn't!"

"I did."

"But I was here long——"

"Mind your heads!" screamed a porter, forcing his way through.

"Here you are!" cried the assistant; "here's another one, so you'll both be satisfied."

Mrs. Gray surged out triumphantly with her bookcase, her rival following with the duplicate. Together they stood on the kerbstone waiting for the Leytonstone tram.

Mrs. Gray was a good-tempered little body, and now that she had got what she wanted she was pleased to be gracious; so when she caught her rival's eye a smile crept about her lips, which brought forth an answering smile, showing that the temper of each was but short, and that no malice was borne.

They got on the same tram, and Mrs. Gray at once held out the olive branch.

"I hope you didn't think me very rude," she said; "but I did so want this for a very special purpose, that I could have done anything rather than go without."

"So could I," said the other eagerly; "you must have thought me rude, too, but I was mad to get it."

"Really? Oh, I didn't think you rude. I'm sure I——"

"Oh, but think how I screamed. You were not so rude as——"

"I screamed too. Aren't they nice?"

"Lovely!"

Harmless chatter and apologies filled the journey, and the friendship was strengthened by both getting out at the same point.

"Do come in and have a cup of tea," said Mrs. Gray; "have you time?"

The other had heaps of time. "But I hardly like to after my rudeness," she said.

"You mean my rudeness," said Mrs. Gray, pok'ing the key in the front door.

By the time that the tea was ready each knew a great deal of the family history of the other, and the bookshelves again came under discussion.

"I've so wanted to get a bookshelf," said Mrs. Gray. "You know, I've a lodger who's such a clever man, and so steady, that I thought he would appreciate this more than anything else."

"Really? Well, my husband's very studious; he loves books, and there's nothing he likes so much as a bookshelf, unless it's a book. He doesn't know I'm buying this; it's to be a surprise."

"So is mine."

"He will be glad. You'd never believe how fond he is of books. He spends all his spare hours in the Free Library; that will show you how studious he is. While I'm staying down here with mother, he keeps in our house all alone because it's near the library; while if he came down here he would lose an hour away from his books."

When they finally parted Mrs. Busby extracted a promise from Mrs. Gray to take tea with her on the following day, and Mrs. Gray declared it would give her the greatest pleasure to do so. Fervent kisses and exclamations of surprise at what the respective husbands would think closed the interview.

The respective husbands heard about the meeting in due course; Gray from his wife, and Busby from George Early. On the occasion of his imparting this information George took the opportunity to borrow a few pounds from Busby, which the cashier lent with some reluctance.

On the same day Mrs. Busby received a wire recalling her to Clapham.

CHAPTER VIII—*George Early holds Fortune in his Arms*

THE constant surveillance of the irrepressible George was beginning to tell upon Gray. The golden dreams inspired by the possession of five hundred pounds a year were slowly fading, and he began to look back with some relish to the days when he could cheerfully call for a whisky and-soda. What was the use of this wealth without the means of enjoying it? Certainly he might hoard it up for a year or two, then cast off the yoke. But could he live through the trial? Besides, the blackmailer must have his due, which considerably diminished the sum.

Gray firmly believed that George had taken infinite pains to worry him, instead of apportioning his vigilance equally among the three legatees. Why couldn't he go and live with Busby or Parrott? Gray could only suppose that these schemers had outwitted the wily George, and it made him mad to feel that he couldn't do the same. Busby especially irritated Gray, for lately he had put on airs till his manner became overbearing.

"If I could only discover what he's being paid to keep off, I'd make it warm for him," thought

Gray, savagely. He pondered over the various drawbacks he had noticed in Busby previous to Old Joe's death, but couldn't call to mind any special vice among them.

"He was always a mean-spirited cuss altogether," he thought. "I suppose he's getting the money to take a Sunday School class and sing hymns."

Gray sounded George on the subject, but met with a cool reception.

"You know my principles," said George. "Do you suppose I'd tell another man's secrets?"

"No, of course not," said Gray. "You wouldn't do anything wrong; you're such a good young man."

George smiled at this subtle flattery.

"I'd like to have a go at that hound," Gray said with emphasis. "He's been putting on airs a bit too much lately, and as you don't seem to be able to keep him under, you might hand over the responsibility to somebody else."

"I might," said George; "but it wouldn't be right. You ought not to ask me such a thing."

"Of course I ought not. I'd give a sovereign to know, all the same."

This tempting offer was lost upon the secretary, who busied himself with his work.

"I believe I'd venture two," said Gray, "just

to get a smack at him. What do you say to that?"

"It'd be worth it," said George.

"Well, jot it down," said Gray, "and I'll hand you the cash. You needn't be afraid of my giving the game away to any one else."

"I wonder you can ask me to do such a thing for a paltry two pounds," said George. "Now, if you'd offered five——"

"I'll see you hanged before you get a fiver out of me," said Gray, rudely.

Seeing, however, that George was indifferent as to whether he spoke or not, he presently ventured to offer him three pounds, and finally grudgingly promised five.

The secretary showed no inclination to impart the secret until the money was produced, and even then was loath to speak.

"It's a mean action," he said, fingering the note lovingly. "I'm not sure that I ought to tell."

"You're sure enough of the money, anyway," Gray pointed out.

"I'll do it for you!" said George, pocketing the money suddenly. "You're not a bad sort, Gray. And I know that you won't try to make money out of it, because that would be robbing me of my little bit. Between ourselves, I must say that there's not another man in the building

I'd do a good turn to so willingly as you. You're a man, Gray, that a fellow can depend on, and I'll always stick up for you, come what may. I like you because you are honest and——"

"Hang the honesty, and stop that rot!" said Gray. "Tell me what I've paid for."

George held up his hand, then tiptoed to the door of Miss Fairbrother's room. Having satisfied himself that there were no listeners, he drew Gray out on the staircase, closing the door behind them.

When Gray returned to his seat in the lower office it was with the consciousness that he had paid a big price for a very small secret. He looked over at Busby, sitting complacently at his work, and mused on the garrulity of old age that had led Joseph Fairbrother to try to reform such a man.

"There's something solid about my failing," he thought. "Drink has ruined many men, and it's worth all the money I get to keep off it. But to allow five hundred pounds a year to a person like Busby for not swearing gets over me. Why, a man like that would be afraid to swear. It's a waste of money."

So potent is the spirit of vengeance that Gray could not wait for an opportunity, but must needs force his new-found knowledge upon the unsuspecting Busby. Avoiding his ledger at the hour

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of closing, Gray followed his new enemy home-wards. There was a sprightliness in the foot of Busby as he tripped nimbly along on the greasy pavement, and a stubbornness in that of Gray as he followed.

Fortune favoured the man from Leytonstone before the couple had gone the whole length of the street. Busby placed his heel upon some slippery substance, and cleaved at the air with his hands. He regained his balance and uttered a most emphatic "Damn!"

A second later he was looking into the stern, relentless eye of James Gray.

"I was nearly over," said Busby, easily, recognizing his colleague. "Those fools who throw orange-peel on the pavement ought to be prosecuted. Mind you don't step on it."

Gray said nothing, but kept a piercing eye on the face of the cashier.

"Do you want me?" said Busby, "or are you coming my way? Don't stand there looking like that."

Gray took Busby's arm in a vice-like grip. "I heard it," he said, solemnly.

"Heard it?" said Busby.

"I was close behind," said Gray. "You didn't know it, but I was there."

Busby misunderstood. "I wish you'd been in front," he said, "then perhaps you'd have

found the orange-peel first. I was as near as a touch going over. When you've quite done with my arm I'll have it for personal use."

"Don't try to fool me," said Gray, sternly, without relaxing his hold. "I know what I heard, and you know what I heard."

Busby's temper now began to get out of hand.

"I don't know what you heard," he said, "but I know that you're making a juggins of yourself. Leave go my arm!"

Gray complied.

"Now, what do you want?" asked Busby, offensively.

Gray lifted one finger dramatically, without appearing to notice the last remark. "I give you warning," he said, in a sepulchral voice. "Beware!"

Busby began to laugh.

"There's something wrong with you, Jimmy; you'd better see a doctor. Come and have a whisky."

"No," shouted Gray. "I refuse to have your whisky."

"Oh, all right," said Busby. "I won't force it on you. You used not to want asking twice; but I've noticed you've been off it a bit lately."

Gray winced visibly under this remark, and proceeded to turn the conversation. He drew nearer to Busby, and whispered hoarsely—

"I've warned you once, but the next time I may tell. Be careful, and remember that Gray is the man who knows."

With this melodramatic exclamation, he turned and disappeared up a side alley with appropriate mystery.

Busby stood looking after him, quite at a loss to understand.

"The man who knows? What the dickens is he talking about?"

Being satisfied that Gray was either drunk or labouring under a delusion, he continued his walk towards Fleet Street.

Gray went home alone that evening, the wounds of the past weeks soothed by this new ointment of retaliation. At the tea-table sat his loving wife, charming as only a woman can be with news on the tip of her tongue.

"Hallo!" said Gray, who saw that something had happened. "You've had some money left you."

Mrs. Gray opened her mouth, perplexed.

"You've found a purse," said her husband, "with three pounds in it, a lock of hair, and some love-letters."

"Jim!"

"You haven't? Then somebody's given you a valuable recipe for the complexion, or is it a new hair-wash?"

"What's the matter with you?"

"I know," said Gray. "You've got another lodger. If that isn't right, I give it up."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Mrs. Gray; "but it's most ridiculous, whatever it is. I had something to tell you; but if you don't want to listen, why, of course, it doesn't matter."

"It does matter," said Gray. "I've been trying to guess."

This was not quite what Mrs. Gray expected, for who among us likes to be read? News, to be news, must burst like a thunder-clap, especially if it isn't very interesting. Seeing that she had been anticipated, the little woman was not anxious to talk; but, seeing that to hold what she had intended to divulge would have been more worrying than to tell it, she poured out the story of her meeting with Mrs. Busby, the family gossip, and, lastly, the legacy left by Mr. Fairbrother.

"It's a shame!" she cried hotly. "You ought to have got a legacy, too, Jim; you're as good as Mr. Busby, I'm sure! Why shouldn't you get a legacy for studying books?"

"I may get one yet," said the uncomfortable Jim, affecting to pass it over lightly. "These things often take a long time in the lawyers' hands. I dare say I shall get one later on."

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Inwardly he was smarting from a fresh wound, which he managed to calm by a great effort. George Early had got the better of him again! He had made a fool of him, and charged five pounds for it. He waited for George to come home.

It so happened that he was doomed to disappointment, for some hours at least. George, with the five pounds chinking in his pocket, had decided to take an evening off, after the cares of a business day in the City, and was at the very moment that Gray awaited him partaking of a comfortable seven-course dinner in no less luxurious a place than the Café Royal. It was evident, too, from the negligent manner in which he ordered a coffee and benedictine, that he had no intention of hurrying home. Gray had therefore ample time in which to think out his plan of argument.



No sign of impending trouble was visible on the face of George as he emerged leisurely from the gaily lighted restaurant, and stood in contemplation for awhile on the pavement, enjoying his Havana. The fingers of his right hand were in his pocket, toying with the ample balance of Gray's fiver, and his train of thought, instead of leading him, as might have been quite natural,

to dwell on the ingenuousness of his landlord, turned to the usefulness of money as an aid to the enjoyment of life.

George Early was not so young as to have never thought of this before; but who can help ruminating on the advantages of wealth amid the luxuriousness of Regent Street? On one side a jeweller's, heavy with gems, flashes its wealth insultingly upon passers-by; next door, a furrier calmly displays a two-hundred guinea wrap; lower down, half a dozen shops are surmounted by the royal arms, and only by turning into a side-street can one realize the significance of any coin under a sovereign. In Regent Street, every other vehicle bears the stamp of wealth, with its spotless coachmen, and horses better groomed than half the men in the City. Languid young lords stroll by arm in arm, displaying a dazzling amount of shirt-front; elaborately coiffured ladies, fresh from some Park Lane boudoir, trip across the pavement, and dive into gorgeous restaurants. Now and again a son of toil passes, but his poverty is swamped by the surrounding glitter.

George looked on at this everyday scene with a comfortable feeling that for the time being he was one of the *élite*. He eyed the dress-suits with the air of a connoisseur, and approved of the toilette of every pretty woman that passed. Among his other fancies, George had a keen eye

for a good figure and trim ankles, and it must be put down to his good taste in frocks and frills that he narrowly observed one young lady in particular, who stood for quite five minutes on the edge of the kerb without appearing to have made up her mind what to do next.

When a man is attracted by a feminine figure that presents a graceful and pleasing back view, he comes in time to speculate upon the looks of the owner, and, if the back view is accorded long enough, to have a natural desire to see if good looks or the reverse are her portion. This is precisely how George felt ; but as the figure continued to stand on the edge of the kerb, he was forced to stroll up the street to satisfy his curiosity. As he did so, the lady made up her mind suddenly, and crossed the road at the same time as two hansom cabs came along in opposite directions. To an observer like George the moment for crossing was obviously ill-timed.

The lady hesitated, went forward, then started back. The drivers yelled, the horses slid, the lady screamed, and George dashed forward—just in time to drag her out of danger.

In less than two minutes a crowd had gathered, and George, much to his own amazement, was handing the lady into a hansom cab, and, what is more, getting in beside her. For the lady was Miss Fairbrother, head of the old-established firm

of Fairbrother and Co., and employer of George himself.

It was all so odd and strange and sudden, George couldn't believe it. Even when he assisted her out and up the steps of the Fairbrother mansion; even when he paid the cabman, and walked away, and found that he was really in Kensington, it didn't seem real. He had a faint remembrance of hearing her say "Thank you, Mr. Early," and of his having explained the occurrence to the butler; but it was all hazy and incomprehensible.

The night was still young when George again set foot in Piccadilly. He had seen fit to walk all the way back, it suited his frame of mind. From dreaming of the odd chance that should throw him into Miss Fairbrother's arms, or her into his, he had come to recalling the plain facts of the adventure, incident by incident, more minutely each time, till he stood still, metaphorically, in the middle of Regent Street, with one arm round the slender waist of his employer.

George was conscious now that it was a very slender waist, although he hadn't been aware of it at the time. He recollected, too, many other details that he had observed imperfectly in the rush of events. Her head had dropped on his shoulder, and one fair hand had clutched

convulsively at his coat. He could see the red lips, the soft cheeks, the dimpled chin, the brown hair, close to his own. She wore an elaborate straw-hat creation that had grazed his forehead, the spot glowed even now as he recalled it. But what he chiefly realized now was that delicious sense of pleasure he had had in holding her in his arms for two seconds, a feeling that the exigencies of the moment had strongly necessitated his suppressing. His present leisure calling for no such harsh measure, he was at liberty to halt, in his fancy, and gaze, in his fancy, at the red lips and dimples of Miss Ellen Fairbrother.

In his present mood, and with his present faculty for handling the subject, he could have gone on from Regent Street to Brunswick Terrace, backwards and forwards, for the rest of the evening, halting each time for a considerable period in the middle of Regent Street, with cabs behind and before, and Miss Fairbrother's head on his shoulder. He could have gone on doing this, and have asked for no other amusement, if the bustling activity of Piccadilly had not led his mind away from the subject. The real truth is that George woke up from his dream in a most unpleasant fashion. In plain words, something descended very heavily on George's right foot.

To recount all that George said, and the

uncomplimentary remarks he made on the other man's want of grace, together with the personal allusions to his figure, and what he would have done to himself if he had had such feet, would not be fitting in a respectable book like this. Such detail is also quite irrelevant. What has to be recorded is that in one of the intervals of vituperation the other man said suddenly—

"George!"

A look of astonishment appeared on the face of George Early, and in a moment his resentment fled. He said, "Well, I'm hanged!" and laughed. The man he was consigning to other regions was Busby.

Under the circumstances, there was nothing to do but retire to the nearest hostelry, and endeavour, by means of the flowing bowl, to re-establish amicable relations. This was done without demur on the part of either combatant; in fact, the fracture seemed likely to be the means of making a strong friendship out of what had been at best a mere business acquaintance. George toasted "his friend Busby," and paid for the drinks, whereupon Busby toasted "his pal George," and called for more.

At the third round, Busby, feeling that some explanation of his presence in that part was necessary, confided to George that he was on his way to a smoking concert, a confession that

prompted George to give some information regarding himself, which he did with due caution, especially that part relating to the five-pound note.

"He's a sly dog, Gray," said Busby; "I'll bet you had a tough job to get a fiver out of him."

George agreed.

"I couldn't be close like that, Early, old chap. You know that what I give I give freely. I don't blame any man for making a bit when he gets the chance. It's nothing to me to tip you a sovereign out of a little windfall like that."

"Of course it isn't," said George, "nor two for that matter."

"No, nor two, you know well enough that I wouldn't make the slightest bother. But Gray, he's that close——"

"Close!" said George; "he worships it. He keeps every farthing."

"I couldn't be mean like that. It's a pity that he hasn't got a few more to tackle him harder than you do."

"So it is," said George.

"He ought to have me!" said Busby. "Why, if I knew—but, of course, it's no business of mine. It would be a spree to get at him. It'd be a picnic to let him see that I knew all about it. He'd have a fit."

The thought of Gray writhing under the

knowledge that a second man possessed his secret pleased Busby immensely, and his merri-ment only subsided on his observing that George was not enjoying the joke.

"Don't you be afraid, old chap," he said. "I wouldn't ask you to tell anything that you didn't want to."

"I know you wouldn't," said George. "You're not that sort."

But the idea having entered into the head of Busby was not easy to get rid of. Perhaps, in spite of his unwillingness to draw secrets from his friend George, he had some idea of doing so when he invited that young gentleman to turn his steps towards the smoking concert, and be passed in as a friend. From what we have seen of George Early, it seems doubtful that he could be easily led into imparting knowledge that was of sterling value to himself, while he kept it to himself; but one can never tell what a man will do for friendship's sake when under the influence of alcoholic liquor.

George Early and Busby went to the concert, and encored the choruses with great gusto. At intervals they had refreshments, and in due course made their way to Charing Cross in a very friendly spirit.

Probably George had imbibed as freely as Busby, but to all appearances the cashier had

surrendered himself unreservedly to the strength of what he had taken. In this mood he was inclined to refer to the subject of Gray's legacy, which he did at intervals, and at which times George, with his usual skill, let his own tongue run loose within bounds.

"You're a close dog," said Busby, at length, "nearly as close as Gray himself."

"What!" said George in astonishment. "You wouldn't have me tell——"

"Tell, be hanged!" said Busby. "He deserves it, doesn't he? Isn't he an outsider? Doesn't everybody know he is? Why, I'd tell anything about a man like that. Everybody knows he's a mean——"

"Ssh!" said George, looking behind him. "Don't shout; somebody'll hear you."

"What does it marrer? Let 'em hear. Everybody knows he's mean."

"Ssh!" said George again.

"Ssh! yourself," said Busby, giving him a playful punch. "Let 'em hear, I say. What does it marrer? What does——"

He stopped suddenly, and caught George by the arm. They looked each other steadily in the eye, and then Busby burst into a wild, silly laugh.

"It's no good, Georgie. It's no good, old man. You've done it—you've given him away."

You've fairly given him away; now, haven't you? That's the secret—I've got it!"

George walked sullenly on without replying, until Busby persuasively urged him not to take it to heart.

"You're too clever for me," said George.

"Never mind, old man, I won't cut you out if I can help it."

"Look here," said George, putting on his most serious air; "don't you go borrowing all his loose cash just because he's obliged to lend it. That won't be fair, you know. You must give me a chance."

Busby magnanimously promised that George should not be made to suffer more than he could help.

Elated with his success in one direction, he next began to hazard a guess at the prominent vice of Parrott, which resulted in George's imploring him to "draw it mild" for the sake of friendship. But, being started, it was no easy matter to stop a man like Busby. The only course for George Early to take was to dexterously swap the vices of Parrott and Gray, which he did with great success. When Busby hit upon the drink question, George was seized with a trembling fit, and Busby laughed again in triumph.

"I told you you were too clever for me," said

George Early holds Fortune in his Arms 115

George. "All I hope is that you won't overdo it."

Busby hilariously swore at his two absent confreres, and vowed to "tickle them up a bit," just to pay off old scores.

Having embraced his friend, he rolled into a cab, and trundled off to the suburbs.

"He's too clever for me," said George, facetiously, with a smile, as the cab rolled off—"they all are. But I dare say I shall pull through. Now for a small select hotel, and bed."

Instead of seeking the small hotel straight away, he stood for a full five minutes gazing absently across Trafalgar Square. Busby and the smoking concert were entirely forgotten, and George stood again in the middle of Regent Street, with one arm round his employer's waist.

CHAPTER IX—*The Man who laughed Last and Loudest*

GRAY was not in a good temper when he reached the office next morning. He felt that George Early had added insult to injury by absenting himself after procuring five pounds by the meanest of tricks that man could resort to. His fierce wrath of the night before had settled down into a steady glow of bitter resentment, and at times he felt that only a swift and sudden display of physical force could compensate him for so cruel a deception.

Fuel was added to the glowing fire within every time he recalled his own insane behaviour towards Busby on the previous evening. His temper was not improved by observing that the cashier's eye roved in his direction several times during the morning, and that there sparkled in it a light of insolent familiarity. He had a great mind to show his appreciation of this attention as an office-boy would have done—by placing his thumb to his nose and extending his fingers. Such a course was, however, rendered unnecessary by the cashier coming forward to pass the time of day.

"I thought you were rather interested in me

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this morning," said Gray. "Perhaps I owe you something."

Busby grinned. "I don't think so, old man," he said. "I wish you did."

"If I did," said Gray, with brutal frankness, "I'd pawn my watch to pay up, sooner than be in your debt."

"Don't take it like that, old man," said Busby, affably.

"Don't 'old man' me," said Gray. "Keep your familiarity for your friends."

"Now you're getting out of temper," said the cashier, who was in a most angelic mood, and inclined to be considerate.

"I don't want to talk to you," said Gray, offensively.

"I'm sorry for that, Gray," said Busby. "I wanted you to do me a favour."

"You'll be doing me a favour," retorted Gray, "by taking yourself out of my sight—the sooner the better."

"I want," said Busby—"I want you to lend me ten bob, Jimmy."

"I'll see you shot first," said Gray.

Busby's reply to this discourteous remark was to fold his arms and assume a dramatic posture.

"You refuse?" he hissed.

It was an exciting moment.

"I don't lend money to people like you," said Gray.

"Gray," said Busby, solemnly, "I have asked you for the loan of ten shillings."

"That's half a sovereign," said Gray.

"Do you refuse to lend it?"

"I wouldn't lend you twopence," was the reply.

In spite of this plain answer, Busby kept his ground, and said in a low, severe voice, "I'll give you one more chance, Gray. Do you refuse?"

Gray now understood the situation, which had not been clear to him before. It relieved him immensely to find that he was not the only victim of the new private secretary. Assuming a proper reluctance to continue the conversation, he said in a milder tone—

"You know this is my busy day, Busby. I'll see you later on."

"Later on won't do for me," said Busby severely, secretly delighted at the change of affairs. "You've been insolent, and you shall pay the price. I want your answer now."

Gray affected to be seized with fear, and said hoarsely, clutching the desk—

"What do you know?"

Busby was wild with delight. "Everything," he said.

Gray put one hand in his pocket, and said, in a stage whisper, "Ten shillings?"

"Ten shillings," repeated Busby.

Gray took his hand from his pocket and resumed his work.

"Go and hang yourself," he said brutally, dropping the mask. "I'm surprised at a cute chap like you allowing that cuckoo, Early, to bluff you. It's no go, old man, he's had you on a bit of toast."

This sudden change of front convinced Busby at once that Gray was speaking the truth, and a red glow of indignation overspread his features. As soon as he was able, he delivered himself of a scathing denunciation of the unlucky George, accompanied by threats of vengeance.

Misfortune having established more friendly relations between the two, Busby at once confessed to the knowledge of Parrott's drinking habits, at which Gray started, and then laughed contemptuously.

"All bluff," he said.

"It must be stopped," said Busby, fiercely. "We'll be the laughing-stock of the place if it gets about. Besides, it's dangerous."

Gray agreed; and the two entered thereupon into a dark and deadly conspiracy, which had for its initial object the abasement of George Early.

The next step was to secure Parrott's support. This was soon done, and the three conspirators now endeavoured to find some means of putting their adversary *hors de combat*. It was, however, much easier to discover the necessity than the means for removing such an obstacle.

"He's too artful for us," said Gray. "He's the slyest devil I've ever come across."

"I could get him the sack," said Parrott, severely; "but I don't see that that would do any good."

"More likely harm," put in Gray, quickly. "He'd never pay me any rent, and he'd be sure to blackmail me for pocket-money."

"And come to me," added Busby, "when he wanted money for clothes. My missis thinks he's 'such a nice young man,' too."

"He wouldn't be above trying to get money out of me, either," said Parrott, cautiously.

"Above it? He'd do it with all the pleasure in the world."

"We can't kidnap him and lock him in a dungeon. He's one of those slippery brutes that would wriggle out of it, and be down on us worse than ever."

Nothing short of a swift and sudden death seemed possible to repress the terrible George; but all decided that, with the present unsympathetic attitude of the law towards this means

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of removing troublesome persons, nothing in that direction could be thought of. Gray suggested a pleasant little scheme for taking George Early on a holiday trip, and getting him to fall over a high cliff, but it didn't sound feasible to his co-conspirators. If he would only tumble down a well, or slip in front of a steam-roller, the problem might comfortably be solved. Any such plan would, of course, need his active co-operation, which it was felt he would be disinclined to give, even to secure the peace of mind of three such good fellows as Parrott, Gray, and Busby.

At this point of the confab, when the frown of perplexity sat equally heavy on the brow of each legatee, the door of Parrott's office opened, and the trio beheld none other than the subject of their thoughts. No protecting angel had been at work warning George of the plot that was being hatched against his person, for his smile was as serene and beautiful as the morning sun that filtered in through the window panes; his manner was as easy and debonnaire as usual.

"Good morning all," he said affably. "Lovely morning, isn't it?"

Nobody answered.

"It's quite a treat," said George, looking about him, "to be alive on a morning like this,

and to see all your old friends with smiling faces. Now, if I were asked——"

"What do you want?" asked Parrott, sharply.

"To be sure," said George. "What do I want?" He laughed cheerfully. "What do we all want"—looking around—"but to be comfortable and cheerful? Plenty to eat and drink; money, and the love of our friends. Eh, Busby?"

The cashier gnashed his teeth.

"In this life," began George, sitting on the edge of the table, and stretching forth one hand.

"In this life——"

"That's enough," said Parrott. "Remember where you are."

"Infernal cheek!" vociferated Gray, scowling at his lodger.

"I beg your pardon," said George, contritely. "Business is business, of course. I beg your pardon. It was the glorious morning that made me feel like it; and when I came in and saw all my old friends looking so happy—there, I beg your pardon."

"Early," said Parrott, rising, and fixing a cold eye upon the secretary, "I have had to speak several times about your conduct in the firm. I have had to warn you. I shall not warn you again. Leniency is quite lost upon some people, and the only way to bring a man to his senses is to show him what he is—to put him in his place."

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You have had your opportunities; you have failed to make use of them, and to show proper respect to your superiors. This can go on no longer; there must be a change."

"Quite right," agreed George; "there must be a change."

"I have done what I could for you," said Parrott, with a terrible frown; "but all to no purpose. You have brought this upon yourself, and you must suffer for it. To-day I shall hold a conference with Miss Fairbrother, and settle the matter. You need not ask for mercy, either from myself or from Mr. Gray, or Mr. Busby; we are done with you. Your chances in this firm have been crushed under your own feet."

"I see," said George, coolly. "That reminds me that I have a letter for you from Miss Fairbrother. It was enclosed in one sent to myself."

He handed over the note, and settled himself in Parrott's armchair while he re-read his own.

There was a painful silence as Parrott read Miss Fairbrother's letter, which in turn was perused by Gray and Busby.

In view of the recent proceedings, it was somewhat disconcerting. It ran—

"DEAR MR. PARROTT,

"I shall not be at the office to-day, probably not all the week, owing to an unfortunate

accident last night, the shock of which has upset me. But for the timely assistance of Mr. Early, I should probably not be alive to write this note. You are doubtless aware that Mr. Early has of late shown a thorough knowledge of the affairs of the firm; and I wish you, therefore, to make it known that during my absence he is to take my place. He will consult me on business matters when he considers it necessary.

"Yours faithfully,

"ELLEN FAIRBROTHER."

During the perusal of this letter, George pulled forth a huge cigar, carefully nipped the end and lit it. From the depth of his comfortable seat he surveyed with a masterful eye the three men who now stood undecidedly by the table.

"Now, my men," he said presently, directing a glance at Gray and Busby; "you have heard the views of your superior on duty and obedience. I don't want you to crush your chances under your own heels. Get to work, there's good fellows; follow a good example while you have one. I don't want Mr. Parrott to have to hold a conference with me about you."

Busby sidled towards the door with a snigger, and went out with his hand over his mouth. Gray assumed an insolent swagger. Hesitating

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a moment, he looked down upon George Early with an intention of throwing off a scathing epigram on his exit. Not finding anything to the point, he swore softly, and banged the door. George got up leisurely, and prepared to follow.

"I shall be upstairs, Parrott," he said with a drawl. "Be sure to knock before you come in."

CHAPTER X—*Hero Worship*

ON arriving in his office upstairs, George seated himself comfortably, and read Miss Fairbrother's note for the sixth or seventh time. He was not one of those men who are prostrated by a sudden change of fortune, but there were materials in this epistle with which even the most unimaginative man might build castles in the air. Taking it word for word, it was at the least most soothing to the heart of George. The note was as follows :—

"DEAR MR. EARLY,

"How can I thank you for your prompt and brave assistance last evening? You saved my life. I shudder to think of what might have happened to me had you not been there. I am sure I should have been killed. I am too much upset to come to the office to-day. Please come to Brunswick Terrace this afternoon, that I may thank you personally for the great service you did me.

"The enclosed note for Mr. Parrott directs him to consult you on all affairs of the firm while I am away. You must take my place until I am quite well; you know everything about the

business, as I am well aware by the valuable assistance you have so often given me.

"Please do not fail to come this afternoon.

"Always yours gratefully,

"ELLEN FAIRBROTHER."

George lunched that day at the Carlton, and from there proceeded in a hansom cab to Brunswick Terrace.

Miss Fairbrother had elected to remove her aunt for the time being, so that the interview was quite private.

The ordeal of being thanked by a rich young lady whose life you have saved must be a most embarrassing one to most men ; to George it did not prove so. He found himself much more at ease than he had expected to be. The embarrassment was all on Miss Fairbrother's side.

She was not sparing in her praise of what she called "his noble action," but, though her voice had the ring of honesty, and her words were sincere, she found it easier to look at the pictures and the furniture than at George Early. Whenever she caught his eye, the pink glow in her cheeks deepened, and her fingers toyed nervously with the lace on her gown. Any young man with a proper regard for the delicate sensibilities of the fair sex would, on finding a young lady so prettily confused, make a valiant

effort to put her at her ease. This George did by assuming a very modest demeanour and concentrating his gaze on the hearthrug. It was effectual, for it gave Miss Fairbrother confidence, and led her to speak of the valuable help George had given to the firm since he had accepted the office of junior clerk, facts which surprised George, and were a testimonial to Miss Fairbrother's skill as an inventor.

"I feel sure," she said impulsively, "that some day you will be a partner in the firm."

"No," said George, modestly; "I shouldn't think so."

"Oh, but I am sure you will! You are so—you know so many things. Doesn't it surprise the others to find how much you know?"

George valiantly suppressed a sudden fit of coughing.

"Now you come to mention it," he said, "I think it does."

"I'm sure it must do," said Miss Fairbrother, warmly. "I think courage and cleverness are things that people cannot help noticing. And unselfishness; think how noble it is to do things for others!"

"Splendid!" said George. "But you can't help it if it's born in you."

"It isn't always that," said Miss Fairbrother. "Some men are very brave. They give their

lives up to benefiting their fellow-creatures, and watching over them as if they were helpless little children."

"Yes," said George, turning his imagination to the past; "my old father used to say, 'Never mind yourself, George; others first—others first, m' lad.'"

"I knew it," cried Miss Fairbrother, with a brightening of the eye that George didn't fail to notice. "You've been following that good advice in spite of all obstacles. Oh, if only everybody would fight and overcome difficulties like that!"

"It's been a bit hard," said George, reminiscently.

"But think of the victory," cried Miss Fairbrother, "when you look back on what you have done."

"Ah! If people only knew."

"A little doubtfully; "but of course you don't exactly want people to know."

"That's just it; they mustn't know a word about it."

"If they did?" she breathed.

"It wouldn't do," said George; "they wouldn't all be so grateful as you."

Miss Fairbrother's fingers grew nervous again, and the point of one tiny little shoe attracted all her attention. George, looking out of the corner

of one eye, felt that matters were progressing most satisfactorily.

"I suppose," said Miss Fairbrother, softly, without turning her head, "you've—you've saved other people before?"

George at once became so modest and so concerned about the inside lining of his hat, that Miss Fairbrother looked up, and added quickly—

"You have; I'm sure you have. Do tell me about it! Oh, I should like to know!"

George took out his handkerchief and rubbed his nose very hard, a performance that may have been actuated by emotion or equivocation.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said, with a suspicion of huskiness in his throat.

"Perhaps they were very ungrateful," Miss Fairbrother observed sympathetically.

"That's it," said George; "some people don't deserve to be saved."

"I'm afraid I haven't given you much but my thanks."

"Don't mention it. It's a pleasure to save any one like you. I'd like to do it every day."

Miss Fairbrother suddenly became so interested in something she saw outside the window that only one pink ear was visible to her rescuer.

"When I think of yesterday," continued George, leaning forward and speaking slowly, "I can't understand why I called up that cab so soon

and put you in it, and why I didn't stand there holding you."

He paused a moment, but Miss Fairbrother never moved. The pink ear seemed to be growing pinker. George went on daringly—

"That ride home in the cab was a ride I shall always think about. I don't think I took my eyes off you once all the way. How could I when——"

Here the conversation, which threatened to take an alarming turn, was interrupted by the sudden entrance of a maid with tea.

That interval of a few minutes so destroyed the continuity of George Early's argument that he decided to abandon it. Miss Fairbrother, having satisfied her curiosity through the window pane, immediately on the entrance of the tea affected to forget what he had been talking of, and invited him with an uncommon lightness of spirits to draw nearer to the small tea-table.

Whatever George Early may have thought of the lady's charms on the previous evening, he was now convinced that they were many and various. In the office she was usually bored and a little bewildered, and at times inclined to be cross about business problems. Her speech was frequently plaintive, and her hair out of curl. Here, with all the worries of business left behind, she was demure, pretty, and altogether charming.

Her eyes sparkled, and the little frowns that were apt to pucker her fair brow gave place to smiling lines around the mouth. In that big office she looked out of place, a frail and worried little body; in this drawing-room she was in perfect harmony with her surroundings, while George seemed out of place there. He felt out of place too, at first; but being of a nature that easily adapts itself to circumstances, he was soon chattering as pleasantly as if he'd been used to drawing-rooms all his life. It was evident that Miss Fairbrother approved of him, and felt satisfied that her rescuer was a young man of noble ideas and a true hero. She was probably not unaware that he was also a good-looking young man, with well-brushed hair, and a smile that was not without charm. These things she had doubtless overlooked before in the worries of business.

George was not a man to miss opportunities, in spite of the adverse criticism of his fellow-workers in the firm of Fairbrother. Having created a good impression, he knew that the next thing to do was to make it lasting. Afternoon tea and pleasant conversation with a girl you have rescued from an untimely death are not among the unsweetened things of this world, but George saw fit to bring his visit to an early close by evincing an earnest desire to return to Fairbrothers' on business which could not be neglected.

Miss Fairbrother approved of his close application to the firm's affairs, but was not sure that she had thanked him sufficiently for what he had done for her. George assured her that by supplying him with a final cup of tea the debt would be fully paid.

Whereat Miss Fairbrother laughed—a sweet, tinkling, little darling of a laugh.

Whereat George laughed—a polite, hearty, good-humoured laugh.

What more natural than that George's big manly hand should press Miss Fairbrother's little finger in taking that cup of tea, and that Miss Fairbrother should blush and hurriedly pour out an extra cup for herself? What more natural than that George should look at her out of the corner of his eye, and find her looking at him out of the corner of her eye; and that they should both be ashamed at having caught each other in the very act? Nothing more natural, surely.

But George knew what a good many men would not have known—that this was the very moment to go. And go he did.

"Good-bye," said Miss Fairbrother, smiling and holding out a very pretty white hand; "I'm very grateful to you."

"Good-bye," said George, taking the pretty hand in his; "I'm glad I was there."

George walked away in a most satisfied frame

of mind. He halted halfway up the terrace and looked back at the great portico and massive windows of the Fairbrother mansion.

"Nice house that," he said; "nice girl too—devilish nice girl!"

Then he called a hansom and drove to Liverpool Street, for, urgent as the firm's business happened to be, his own at the moment was of more consequence.

That night when Gray got home his lodger's room was vacant; George Early had moved into West End lodgings.

CHAPTER XI—*Cupid takes a Hand*

UPPER THAMES STREET is not what it used to be in the days when 'Fairbrothers' was young. One by one the low, grimy warehouses are disappearing, to give place to noble edifices with elaborate office room and electric light. Bit by bit the narrow roadway becomes widened, and the blocking of traffic less frequent.

The language there is not what it used to be. Ancient carmen, who have become locally notorious over victories on the question of choking the narrowest thoroughfare, and who have displayed powers of flowery repartee that no cabman dare challenge, now ride sorrowfully along in silence. Not many of them are left; the newness is killing them off and placing smart young uniformed men in their places.

The public-houses are disappearing, too; at least, the old ones are, for new ones rise rapidly on the same ground, and "business is carried on as usual during alterations." The beer there is not what it used to be; so say the old hands, and they ought to know, for they've taken it regularly enough, and can speak from experience.

Everything in Upper Thames Street is affected

by the march of progress; and nothing more noticeably than the City man's caterer.

Forty years ago you had no choice but to pick a midday meal at the nearest tavern or a cook-shop. In the one you met red-faced men who swore, took snuff, and whipped off a pint of ale like winking; in the other melancholy clerks, with family cares and whiskers, consumed boiled beef and carrots in a "dem'd demp," warm atmosphere, and finished up with light snacks of plum-roll, as greasy and melancholy as themselves. The young man with the clean collar was not catered for then as he is to-day. There were young men then, of course—though not many with clean collars—but they couldn't afford boiled beef, and were not so educated to beer. Where they lunched is a mystery. I suspect that the theory of a venerable dock porter, that "they took a bit o' grub in a handkercher, and ate it by the water-side," is very nearly correct. I suppose the office-boys of those days did the same thing.

Now the midday lunch is one great, wonderful and far-spreading meal. It is as various as it is important; the one touch of interest to midday London. No class of the London worker is neglected; none so obscure, strange, or eccentric as to be forgotten. Boiled beef and carrots have fallen into disuse, except among a few obstinate grey-haired clerks, who would sooner give up

clerking than change their habits ; tavern lunches are popular enough, among bucolic book-keepers ; but the great man, the star luncher in the eye of the up-to-date caterer is the young man with the clean collar.

For him and his kin we have the tea-shop, the dining-rooms, the restaurant, the café, Lyons', the A.B.C., the Mecca, and others. Snacks of fish, vegetarian dinners, quick lunches ; smart waitresses to serve him and smile upon him. He sits upon a cushioned seat, looks at himself in a mirror placed obsequiously before him, rings his hat on a servile, gilded knob, and is requested to acquaint the manager with any uncivil behaviour on the part of the menials of the establishment. When my lord has finished his meal, which may cost anything from twopence upwards, a gorgeous smoking-room yawns for his presence, at no extra cost. Here again the seats are cushioned and the mirrors opposite. Here are draughts, dominoes, and chess, kept specially for him. All for the young man with the clean collar, whose pence are worth fawning for—the best customer of the City caterer.

Upper Thames Street, with its noisy vans and riverside associations, has not been neglected by the caterer. It has its sprinkling of smart tea-rooms and restaurants within easy reach. To various of these the office youths of Fairbrothers'

betake themselves daily, and to one in particular go two members whom we will follow.

Henry Cacklin is a junior clerk of three months' service, a connoisseur of cigarettes, smart beyond his sixteen years, and a devil with the girls. His companion, William Budd, is a mere office-boy, sixteen also, but with less business ability; due no doubt to his excessive interest in affairs that don't concern him. Cacklin has a strong partiality for sausage-and-mashed, when he can afford it, which is seldom. When he cannot it is his habit to look over the menu and inquire as to the quality of the present batch of sausages, finally deciding that as the last were so disgustingly bad, he must try a ham sandwich and a cup of coffee.

Billy Budd, who makes no secret of his desire to have plenty for money, favours lemonade and the largest penny buns; a selection that arouses the scorn of Cacklin, who wonders how any "feller" can expect to be chummy with the waitress on "buns"!

"Rotten tack that!" he says, contemptuously, toying delicately with his sandwich. "If you had brain work to do, old chap, you'd soon notice the want of a bit of meat."

"No fear," said Billy. "What about old Busby? I saw him 'aving a bun and milk yesterday."

"Busby," said Cacklin, with a sneer; "a lot he hurts himself. I'd like his job at half the price, and keep my grandmother out of the money."

Depreciation of other people's abilities was a sad failing with Cacklin. He had at various times expressed his willingness to take over the work of many of his superiors and do it with "one hand tied behind him," besides showing them "a thing or two" about office work, if they so desired it.

"Here, what do y' think!" said Billy, suddenly, stuffing his mouth full of bun. "Saw old Polly last night and his girl. Nice little daisy, too, she was. Called him 'Thomas'—'Oh, Thomas!'"

Billy was convulsed for a few minutes at his own vulgar wit; much to the disgust of his companion, whose attitude towards the fair sex was distinctly *blasé*.

"She's no catch," said Cacklin; "I'd like him to see the little bit of goods I met up at Richmond last Sunday. Great Scott! old man, she was rippin'; and quite a kid—only seventeen. She was fair gone, too; I had a regular howling job to get away from her. Promised to meet her on Thursday, just to get away!"

Cacklin laughed at the recollection of his own subterfuge, and tipped a wink to the waitress, who replied with a haughty stare.

"I say," said Billy, turning in his usual way

to other people's affairs; "Early's fairly got it, ain't he?"

"What do you mean by 'fairly got it'?" said Cacklin, annoyed at the indifference of the waitress.

"Why, got it with her—the missis. They went off together this morning in a hansom, as chummy as you like. Handed her in, he did, and put it on like winking when he spoke to the cabman; laughin' and talkin' like blazes, they were."

Cacklin winked again, but this time at Billy Budd.

"If you want to know anything, my boy," he said, "you put your money on Early. He knows his book, you take my tip. I've watched the game from the beginning, and I know a thing or two about it. The others may think they're fly, and he may bamboozle them; but he'd have to get up before six to get over me on that lay."

He paused to light a cigarette, and then leant back in his seat.

"Now I'll tell you a bit more," he said, with a knowing squint. "Mr. George Early's playing up to hook her, and he'll do it, too. Put that in your cigarette-holder, my son. She'll be Mrs. George Early soon, if you want to know anything."

"No fear," said Billy.

"Oh?" said Cacklin. "Well, if you like to bet on it I'll lay you a quid that it comes off. I'll lay you a level quid that he marries her. And it's a certainty, too, you'd lose the money."

"She wouldn't marry him," said Billy, stolidly.

"Wouldn't she?" said Cacklin. "You don't know anything about women, my boy. I suppose she hasn't had him up at her 'ouse much the last three weeks, eh? Only about four times a week. They haven't been up in the office together much, have they? They ain't been out and about much, either? I didn't meet 'em at Earl's Court, did I, and Watkins didn't see 'em go to the Trocadero together, did he? You've had your eyes shut. Why, he's been following her about, and she's been running after him when he didn't, ever since the first day he did the bossing up in her office."

"What about saving her life? Matthews said she was chased by a mad horse, and Early saved her just as she was going to be trampled to death."

"Matthews is a silly fool. I know all about his saving her: I've heard the true story. She's cracked on him over that, and thinks him a hero. All women are the same. There was a fine gel cracked on me once through helping her over the road on a wet day. If Early takes my tip, he'll keep the game up for all it's worth."

"What sort of boss d' you think he'd be?" said Billy.

"Thunderin' good!" said Cacklin, briefly.

"He ought to give us all a rise if he marries her," said William Budd, ruminating.

"So he will, you can bet," said the junior clerk. "Early's the right sort of chap to boss the show; he's been putting the other chaps in their places a bit in the last few weeks. About time, too. He's made Polly sit up, and Gray's been nearly off his crummet. A lot of lazy 'ounds, they are; rousing up the other chaps when they sleep all day themselves."

With this summary verdict on his superiors, Cacklin produced a draught-board and prepared to give a scientific display of his powers, in a friendly game with Billy. This game was a regular feature in Mr. Cacklin's lunch-hour, and usually resulted in his making all the scientific moves while his opponent won the game; whereupon he would enter into a lengthy explanation of his slight error in not huffing at the right time, by which action he would have taken four kings and literally "romped home."

The present game came to an end in the usual way, Cacklin ascribing his defeat to his own generosity in giving his opponent "a chance" at a critical moment.

"Now I'll have a cheque if you *don't* mind,"

he said, in sweetly insinuating tones to the waitress. "I must get back and start the men at work, and see my lady secretary about her holidays."

"Get back and sweep out the passage, you mean," said the girl, pertly.

Cacklin ignored this rude remark, and lit a fresh cigarette.

"Who was that young feller I saw you with last night?" he said, winking at Billy.

"Keeper of the monkey-house, of course. Lucky thing he didn't see you."

"Don't be saucy now," said the junior clerk, pleasantly, "or I sha'n't take you up the river on Sunday. Give him my love this evening, and mind you're home by ten."

"Take him off," said the girl to Billy; "the coffee's got in his head."

CHAPTER XII—*An Ironmonger in Love*

MASTER CACKLIN'S observations on the friendship existing between George Early and his employer were not without a great deal of truth, strange as it may appear. George Early and Miss Fairbrother were on friendly terms—very friendly terms, in fact.

That first interview at Brunswick Terrace had been followed by many others; interviews that ostensibly had a business purpose, but that drifted off into cold lunch and a flower show; or afternoon tea and small-talk. Occasionally the conversation would take a turn that left Miss Fairbrother somewhat embarrassed, and George Early saying things that had nothing to do with the iron trade at all. It was obvious, too, that these interviews were by no means disagreeable to either George or his employer; but that both were in a high state of excitement afterwards when alone.

Miss Fairbrother had returned to the firm after a week's absence, and resumed her accustomed seat in the big private office. But George no longer assumed the modest demeanour of the private secretary; his desk was placed in the big

room, and the clerks who drifted in and out on affairs of business invariably found the pair chatting in a most unbusiness-like manner. Moreover, Miss Fairbrother declined to enter into most of the hardware problems submitted to her, but begged that "Mr. Early" might be consulted instead. "Mr. Early" became a person of importance, from whom a hint was as good as an order; to whom the general office staff said "sir," and the three legatees adopted an attitude of sullen respect.

The firm's members drew their own conclusions on the question of the friendship. It was clear that George had rendered his employer a great service, and that she was duly grateful to him, perhaps something more. It was clear, too, that George did not intend to miss any opportunities, either in the way of friendship or his own advancement; for on the first score he was clearly in favour, and on the second he was already drawing a bigger salary. Whether or not he was scheming for a nearer and dearer position than that of mere *employé* to Miss Fairbrother, it was not for anybody to say; but the fact remained that he appeared daily in gorgeous raiment, visited frequently at Brunswick Terrace, travelled with his employer in hansoms, and had been escorting the lady to places of amusement. These things clearly indicated that

Miss Fairbrother "approved" of George in no ordinary sense.

Just how matters really stood between them was known to nobody but George and Miss Fairbrother, and perhaps Miss Fairbrother's aunt. It was not for the young lady, even in her position of employer, to unbend any more than any other of her sex, supposing she had matrimonial designs. Queens may propose, but even they dislike the job; for they are only women after all, and it is quite natural for a woman to wish to be wooed and asked for. And however strong George Early may have considered his chances to be, it is certain that he was not the sort of young man to spoil them by prematurely placing his heart upon his sleeve.

It may have been the extreme brightness of the sun that persuaded Miss Fairbrother one morning to express a strong disinclination for work. It was the day after Cacklin's confidence to William Budd, and even in Upper Thames Street the weather was as fair as summer weather can be.

"How lovely the river looks!" said the young lady, fixing a pair of bright eyes on a dilapidated steamer that ploughed its way gracefully towards Westminster.

"Just the sort of day for a trip to Hampton Court," said George. "Pity we can't shift the office up there, isn't it?"

"I don't know ; I've never been there."

"Ah"—bestowing an affectionate glance upon a curl on her left shoulder—"you've missed one of the best sights on the river."

"Don't!" said Miss Fairbrother; "you'll make me want to go. And you know"—slowly—"how busy we are."

If the papers on Miss Fairbrother's desk were any criterion, it did not take much to make the firm busy.

"Of course," said George, proceeding with caution, "if you wish to go, I can look after everything. It's a shame not to take advantage of a bright day; it may rain to-morrow."

"I've heard that Hampton Court is very pretty."

"It's a sight that nobody should miss on a day like this."

Miss Fairbrother laughed.

"The grass there is greener than anywhere else on the river, the water's clearer, and the swans are whiter," said George.

"How do you get there?"

The secretary laid down his pen and paused to consider.

"There's Waterloo," he said—"trains rather stuffy and porters grumpy. Then there's a wagonette from Piccadilly—horses bony and seats rickety. Then there's——"

"I don't think I'll go," said Miss Fairbrother.

"I should," said George. "The boat from Westminster is very comfortable. You can get lunch on board, and it's really a most delightful trip."

Miss Fairbrother was silent for a moment. "No," she said slowly; "I don't think I'll go."

George turned round and winked at a book-case, then rose slowly and walked to the window, where Miss Fairbrother stood watching the sunlit surface of the river.

"There's a sudden slackness of orders to-day," he said. "If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to take a day off myself and go on the river."

Miss Fairbrother smiled, and George went on—

"I shouldn't think of asking if it were not quite possible to leave things; but, of course, if you think it inadvisable, I'll willingly——"

"Certainly not," said Miss Fairbrother. "Take the day by all means."

"Thank you," said George, politely. "Then in that case, as I know the river well, I'm sure you'll allow me to——"

Miss Fairbrother blushed and looked away.

"It's a comfortable boat," urged George, "and the trip is really splendid. My old landlady's son was the purser last year, and he used

to say that they've cured more invalids on that trip than half the hospitals in London."

A smile broke out on Miss Fairbrother's face, and George immediately reached for his hat.

"Hansom?" he said.

"Please"—softly.

As they bowled along towards Westminster George Early sat upright in his seat, and replied to Miss Fairbrother's sallies with a brightness that surprised even himself. Something inside him seemed to be whispering that this was going to be a day of days—one of those bright periods when everything goes with a comfortable rattle, and you don't *think*, but *know*, there is going to be fireworks in the evening, although you haven't seen the programme. Poverty, crime, trouble, hardship, and everything ugly is deadened; you hear only the voice of your companion, see only the glint of the sunshine, the white frocks and clean collars, new houses and green trees. You start off with your machinery going at a gentle, thump-thump pace, like the steamer, and you keep it up while the day lasts.

George enjoyed that trip, and Miss Fairbrother enjoyed it too. It's astonishing how it improves a young woman's looks and a young man's temper to ride on a steamboat, even when both were agreeable before. There were many

things to see, most of which George had to explain. What he didn't know he invented, which didn't make much difference, as it is probable Miss Fairbrother was listening more to George's voice than to what he said. There were many occasions when George had to take Miss Fairbrother's arm, and once when the boat lurched he was obliged to catch her round the waist; none of which incidents upset the good feeling existing between them, but rather increased it.

At Hampton Court they did the usual round through the Palace, and were for the first time that day a little bored. Like a good many other people, they found that the faded relics of dead-and-gone monarchs are not only uninteresting, but very depressing, so much so that the sight of a new windsor chair that King George never sat upon becomes an object of unusual interest and a welcome relief.

"I never thought," said Miss Fairbrother, "that kings and their furniture could be so uninteresting. I think I enjoyed seeing the soldiers on guard more than the royal furniture."

"Yes," said George; "and I think I enjoy being out here, sitting by the river, more than either the furniture or the soldiers."

"It's delightfully quiet and soothing."

"It's grand. I've never seen much of the

country in my life, but I do enjoy it when I get a glimpse."

"In Australia," said Miss Fairbrother, "I saw very little of town life. We lived in the country most of the time."

"And you were sorry to leave it?"

"At first. Since I've been here I think I like England quite as well—especially London. There's no place like London, I'm sure."

"Perhaps not," said George, absently.

"No place in Australia," said Miss Fairbrother, confidently.

"I'd like to go there," said George; "I believe it's a fine country."

"Oh, it's very nice"—casually.

"The colonials are fine fellows."

Miss Fairbrother picked a blade of grass and examined it critically. George looked at a launch coming down the river. It was a crowded launch, and the antics of the men on board attracted his attention. As he continued to look he observed that Miss Fairbrother shifted her glance from the blade of grass to his own features. She looked at the launch as he turned round.

"Lucky fellows!" said George. "A steam launch is one of the things I covet."

"Really?" said Miss Fairbrother, quickly.

"Not exactly covet," said George; "but it's a nice way of seeing the country."

"I think I prefer a quiet spot like—like——"

"Like this"—softly.

A faint blush caused Miss Fairbrother to turn her attention to some boats coming up the river.

"It's very nice here, isn't it?" she said.

"At present it is," said George.

Miss Fairbrother wilfully misunderstood. "In the winter, of course, it's very cold and damp."

"So it is in the summer."

"How can that be?" She looked up smiling.

"When one is alone," said George, "the greenest field might be uninteresting and the warmest day cold."

Miss Fairbrother blushed and laughed. She made no secret now of the fact that she understood the compliment.

"You think I am not in earnest," said George, boldly, placing one hand upon hers, as it plucked the grass blade by blade. "I am quite serious; I should never have enjoyed the trip alone—you know I shouldn't."

Her eyes were upon the grass, where she managed to wriggle one finger of the imprisoned hand and press the soft earth with its pink nail.

"Don't do that," said George; "you'll make your fingers dirty."

He lifted the hand and examined the small pink finger.

"It's a pretty name," he said irrelevantly.

Their eyes met for a second, then hers were covered by the long lashes.

"Ellen, I mean," said George. "I always liked that name, but I suppose it wouldn't do to call you by it."

Her breath came faster.

"I suppose it wouldn't do?" said George.

He looked at her cheek, now crimson, and leant nearer.

"Ellen," he whispered softly.

A launch on the river hooted shrilly in the distance, and a boisterous laugh from the opposite bank echoed faintly over the water. George leant nearer till his shoulder touched hers. His arm that had rested idly behind slid round her waist with gentle pressure.

"It wouldn't do, would it?"

The launch hooted again, and a boatman on the water yelled something undistinguishable to another boatman.

"Ellen!"

Miss Fairbrother's tongue was evidently incapable of utterance, for there was still no response. Then George Early's arm tightened about the slim form of his employer and drew it into a closer embrace. His head bent until her breath came softly on his cheek. And then——

Then George Early kissed her.

A venerable angler looking for worms five

minutes later stopped, suddenly transfixed, to see a young man and young woman with arms so lovingly entwined and lips pressed together.

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There was a bright moon that evening as the Hampton Court boat bumped against the pier at Westminster. The people streamed up into the roadway, and one couple popped into a hansom.

"Trocadero? Right you are, sir," said the cabman.

Two hours later another cab took the couple to Brunswick Terrace. The lady was helped out by the gentleman, with whom she conversed for five minutes in the shadow of the porch. As they parted, the gentleman said—

"Good night, my darling."

"Good night, George dear," said the lady.

CHAPTER XIII—*A Fortnight's Holiday*

IT would be difficult to say exactly how Fairbrothers' took the news of George Early's engagement to its chief, for it did not burst upon the staff in an official proclamation, but leaked out, and was generally credited as a mere rumour. That Miss Fairbrother should be absent from the office for ten days was not considered an extraordinary circumstance in the light of recent events, nor was it anything extraordinary for George Early to assume a tone of importance in affairs of the firm; but among the bright youths who copied the Fairbrother letters and handled the Fairbrother ledgers there were some detective spirits that did not fail to notice certain irregularities in the speech of the new manager.

More than one pair of eyebrows in the counting-house were lifted noticeably when the unusual "I" supplanted the usual "we," and certain dark and prophetic allusions by the manager as to what he would do about some particular affair "in a few weeks," brought the heads of the staff together at times when business was of more importance than desultory conversation.

In spite of rumours, the staff would probably have remained in the dark until the official announcement, had Miss Fairbrother not paid a

flying visit to Upper Thames Street and come under the eagle eye of William Budd. That precocious youth singled out the engagement ring in a twinkling, and by lunch-time the whole office knew that Miss Fairbrother had found a husband. With one accord they fixed upon George Early as the lucky man. The office enjoyed its secret for one whole day; on the next Parrott was summoned to Brunswick Terrace, and instructed to take over the affairs of the firm while Miss Fairbrother changed her name to Early, and took a fortnight's holiday for the purpose of getting used to it.

It was only fitting that her Aunt Phoebe should hold a formal conversation with the prospective husband, and to this interview George Early went with the confident feeling that it would end amicably. It was not exactly the sort of interview that he expected, yet he could not say that he was any the less pleased at the prospect before him.

Aunt Phoebe shook hands, and intimated that her niece had gone out for the afternoon.

"You have had my congratulations," she said, "and I have only to repeat to begin with that you are a very lucky man."

George beamed and murmured his thanks.

"I don't hold with any of her nonsense about you being a hero, you know," she went on; "it's

time enough to praise you when I've found that you're a good husband. And for my part I'm inclined to hope that you're a much more ordinary man, for I've no faith in heroes as husbands."

George coughed, and put his hat on the table.

"Before you marry," said Aunt Phœbe, practically, "it's just as well that you should know your prospects. If you have any idea of taking the Fairbrother fortune in your own hands, you'll be disappointed, for that is to remain entirely at the disposal of my niece, who is guided by me in her business affairs. I may as well say that I have some control over her and the property that will not be affected by her marriage. You need not fear that she will not be generous to you. Your position will be formally that of head of the firm; and, so far as income is concerned, nobody will guess that you are not the owner entirely."

"If it's all the same to you," said George, "I'd rather not hear any more on the subject."

"Indeed?" said Aunt Phœbe, coldly.

"I've got to call on a tailor at four o'clock, and it's now half-past three."

"This is a time to be serious," said Aunt Phœbe, severely.

"It isn't," said George; "it's a time to be married. That's quite enough for me just at present."

"I want you to understand about the property."

"I don't want to know. Do what you like with it. I'll leave it to you."

Aunt Phoebe promptly vacated her seat, and impatiently rang the bell and ordered tea. George thereupon, for the twenty-fifth time that day, consulted a note-book in which a confused mass of scribble spread itself over many pages. He was obliged to confess to himself that for the first time within his remembrance his brain was in a chaotic state. On confiding this intelligence to Aunt Phoebe, her ruffled feelings became smooth, for the most unintelligent person would have seen at once that this simple fact had revealed in George the common failing of the ordinary man.

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George Early and Miss Fairbrother were married, and it is sufficient for our purpose to say that they went on the Continent for a fortnight, and met with the usual discomforts familiar to other travellers, and faced them with the heroic fortitude common in other honeymoon couples. If George was in any way different from another man in a similar position, it lay in the fact of his not waking up and wondering if his good fortune were a dream. George Early always met windfalls with a familiar nod, and

took them as a matter of course ; which is, after all, not a bad idea, if you can bring yourself to it, and if you happen to be one who runs in the way of good fortune. He did not, as may be supposed, allow his thoughts to run immediately on the prospect before him, nor form any notions of having "a high old time when he got his hands on the cash." You can never tell how marriage and good fortune will affect a man, and I don't suppose there was a person in Upper Thames Street who could give a near guess as to how it would affect George Early. Nobody, not even George himself, could have told you, though he could probably have guessed nearer than other people. But that it changed his fortunes and those of other members of the firm, will be seen as the history progresses. Some evidences of change in Upper Thames Street were already apparent, even before Mr. and Mrs. Early had returned from the honeymoon.

Three men had watched the growing friendship of the two with absorbing interest, and read the marriage announcement with some approval. They did so from motives of selfishness. In this change of affairs they saw relief from irritation that had tried their tempers and torn at their pockets.

Parrott watched his increasing hoard with miserly satisfaction, and had already begun to

weigh the merits of Streatham and Upper Tooting as suburban retreats, where, in company with the economical wife of his choice, he might enjoy the fruits of married life, and be free from the harassing demands of the blackmailer. George Early single was a source of increasing danger, but George Early married to a rich wife might be put out of his reckoning.

Upon reflection, a man might well assume at this stage that Old Fairbrother's legacies bid fair to effect the purpose for which they were instituted. Here were three men who might have been led away from faults that were eating into the soul of each, had not an impudent blackmailer stepped in at the beginning and torn from their clutches the healing medicine. Who knows but that they now might be well on the way to reform; that Parrott might be cheerfully handing crisp bank-notes to needy friends, Busby speaking the clarion voice of truth, and Gray quaffing copious draughts of bright sparkling water in place of the noxious intoxicant of his habit?

At the time of George Early's marriage, it must be admitted no evidence of reform had appeared, although nearly a month had elapsed since the hush-money had been asked for and paid. Parrott had successfully resisted the appeals of those who sought to relieve him of sundry half-crowns and pieces of gold; and Busby,

as of yore, deceived all who came in his way, with a tongue that had lost none of its cunning. If the truth must be told, the head clerk had grown closer than ever, and had gone so far as to turn a deaf ear to an urgent request for a shilling.

Mrs. Gray noticed with regret that her husband's fondness for whisky had suddenly revived, and sighed deeply as she thought of the splendid lodger she had lost.

"So fond he was of you, too, Jimmy," she said.

"Who's fond of me?" asked Gray.

"Why, Mr. Early. You didn't drink so much of that horrid stuff when he was here. He had such a good influence over you."

"I know he had," said Gray, filling his glass. "Now he's got somebody who'll have an influence over him. Poor old George!"

"Oh, Jimmy! Do you think she'll be cruel to him? Why ever did he marry her?"

"Couldn't help it, I suppose," said her husband. "Perhaps he's going to reform her. Poor old George!"

"Jimmy," said Mrs. Gray, severely, "it's a shame for you to laugh. You ought to have prevented the marriage, if she's a horrid creature who'll worry his life out. You know he's been a good friend to you."

"Has he?" said Gray. "I'd forgotten that. Then I'll be a good friend to him. I'll go and be his lodger. No, I won't; I'll go and tell Mrs. Early that he's one of the best."

Gray helped himself to a further supply and toasted the new governor as "one of the best," in which Mrs. Gray, although a temperate little body, joined.

"When do you go to the club again, Jimmy?" said Mrs. Gray.

"Club? What club?" said Gray, who was arriving at that state when the truth begins to leak out unawares.

"Why, your club, of course; you're the secretary."

"Am I? Hooray! Hooray for the secretary!"

"You are the secretary, aren't you, Jimmy?" said Mrs. Gray.

"Course I am. You just said so. Hooray for——"

"Jimmy!" Mrs. Gray clutched his arm and took the glass from his hand. "Have you been deceiving me? Tell me if you belong to the club or not, and if you're really the secretary? Oh, Jimmy!"

Mrs. Gray sat down and burst into tears.

If anything was calculated to bring Gray into a sober state, it was the tears of his wife. He was

not a model husband, but he had some affection for the little woman who adored and cared for him, and the sight of her weeping awoke him to the error he had made.

Gray had put his arm about her and lifted her up.

"I'm the secretary, little woman. Now don't cry any more. It's all right. I'm the secretary."

"You're not," sobbed Mrs. Gray; "I know you're not. You've been deceiving me, you wicked thing, and I—I won't forgive you. You don't belong to the club at all—you know you don't."

"I tell you I'm the secretary, don't I?" persisted Gray.

"I don't—don't believe you. You've been tel—telling me stories, Jimmy. It's a sha—shame to tell me stories. You oughtn't to do it."

"Look here," said Gray, taking her in his arms; "do you want me to prove what I say? Do you?"

"Ye—yes," she sobbed.

"Then ask George. If you won't believe me, ask him."

Mrs. Gray's sobs ceased and she began to dry her eyes. Gray reached over and helped himself to a little more whisky. "Ask him," he said, taking a drink.

In a little while Mrs. Gray, very much ashamed

of herself, put her arms about her husband's neck and kissed him.

"I'm very sorry, Jimmy," she said, "I do believe you."

Mrs. Gray didn't ask George, and her husband continued in his dangerous career of intemperance. It was a pity that he did so, for with the good start as a teetotaller he had got during George Early's residence, he might have reformed and prevented the trouble that came, as trouble always does when you look for it.

CHAPTER XIV—"Tommy Morgan"

THERE was a mild hum of excitement in the offices of Messrs. Fairbrother. The honeymoon was over, and Mr. George Early had returned. He was already sitting in the big upstairs office, discussing business problems with a calmness and intelligent interest that surprised everybody. Those who had imagined him lolling in the armchairs, smoking expensive cigars, and telling his employes not to bother him but to look after the orders themselves, were more than astonished, and at once came to the conclusion that George Early had reformed.

The three legatees were among those who watched this business activity with satisfaction. If George Early had decided to throw all his energies into the business it was certain that he would give no thought to trivial questions of blackmail, nor waste his time in bothering about the reform of men in whom he was not interested.

Nevertheless he had not forgotten it, as Gray found out on the occasion of one of his visits upstairs.

"How's your wife, Gray?" asked the new master.

Gray replied that she was in the best of health.

"I hope she'll remain so," said George; "she's a good little woman, and she deserves a good husband. Now that you've given up the drink she ought to be very happy."

"She's happy enough," said Gray.

George said that he was glad to hear it.

"I suppose you've given up the secretaryship of the Old Friends' Club?" he said severely.

"Perhaps I have, perhaps I haven't," said Gray, who resented this catechism. "I shall give it up when it suits me; and this job, too, when I feel inclined."

"Don't do anything rash, now," said George; "I don't want to interfere with your affairs. You know that's not my way."

"Of course I do," said Gray; "you wouldn't think of such a thing."

"All I want, Gray," said George, "is to see you on the right path. You've got a good wife, a good home, and a good income. Stick fast to your business, and you'll be a successful man. Punctuality, perseverance, and temperance are the three rules for success, as you've heard me say many times. You have seen me climb the ladder step by step, until I have reached my present position. How has it been done? I need not tell you, Gray."

"No," said Gray; "I'd rather you didn't."

"Don't be afraid that I shall interfere with you," said George; "I know that I can trust you to go along the straight path. As I said to my wife the other day, 'If there's one man in the firm I can trust, it's James Gray.'"

"Thanks," said Gray. "If you've quite finished, I'll go down and send up somebody else."

Left alone, George Early smiled to himself, ruminated for a few moments, and then proceeded to examine the papers before him.

He had no intention of ruling with an iron hand, nor of exacting homage from the employes. He wanted to be in command, and at present he held that position, would be contented with it, too, while the interest lasted. By-and-by, perhaps, he would aspire to positions in the public service, become a sheriff, and eventually Lord Mayor. These things were very vague as yet, for at present the distraction of a big position, a wife, and a West End mansion he found sufficient.

He did not forget to put the head clerk and the cashier quite at their ease with respect to the legacies they were enjoying, nor to acquaint them, as he had done Gray, with the high opinion he had of their abilities. Parrott received his sermon with the stolidity one expects of a man whose sense of humour is

under the average; and Busby, who knew exactly in what spirit he was being received, affected to be pleased, and wished George success in his new position.

Taking into consideration his humble start not many months previous, it must be conceded that George Early made a very good impression on his first day as proprietor of the old-established firm of Fairbrother.

It was a curious coincidence that on this very day another young bridegroom took over the affairs of an old-established firm in the City of London; and as these two firms have already had business relations sufficient to put them on a nodding acquaintance, and are likely to have further relations of an exciting nature, it will not be amiss to see how matters are proceeding with bridegroom number two, especially as his first efforts in his new post indirectly concern bridegroom number one.

Dibbs and Dubbs is a name familiar to all City youths whose business or pleasure it is to pass through St. Paul's Passage in Queen Victoria Street. The names stare at everybody from a brass plate, polished to a high degree of brilliancy, whereon it is further announced that these gentlemen follow the honourable profession of the law, and are to be found on the first floor within.

Dibbs, it may be mentioned, has long passed into the Unknown, and Dubbs, having wrestled for a considerable time with failing health, has recently followed him, leaving his son-in-law, but newly married, to attend to such clients as remain faithful, and to see that the brass plate keeps its position and its lustre.

The young lawyer, no less indefatigable than George Early, proceeded to do both these things as soon as he arrived in St. Paul's Passage. Having set the office-boy to work on the brass plate, he made a searching investigation of the contents of the office, and discovered that the firm itself was on the verge of following the lamented partners, unless some one with grit, energy, and ability was able to set to work and instil new life into it. This, without a moment's hesitation, he decided to do himself.

He sat down in the only easy-chair, and opened a long envelope labelled "Fairbrother," one of the few envelopes he had found in the safe. The contents of it were evidently of a highly interesting nature, for they drew from the reader exclamations of astonishment as from time to time he turned over the folios and re-read portions of them. Having finished, he rang a bell on the table.

"Mole," he said to the clerk who entered, "do you know anything of the affairs of Fairbrothers'?"

"No, sir," said the clerk, promptly.

"Nothing whatever?"

"Never heard the name before, sir," said the young man, decisively.

"Good," replied the lawyer; "be ready in half an hour to go out for me on an important mission."

"Yes, sir," said the clerk, with alacrity. An important mission was evidently of very rare occurrence at Dibbs and Dubbs, for the clerk promptly retired to his obscure office and executed a war-dance.

In half an hour the bell rang, and he returned to the outer office.

"Read that carefully," said his master, handing him a brief note.

Mole proceeded to do so with knitted brows.

"You understand thoroughly what you have to do?"

"I've got it pat," said the clerk, putting the note in his pocket.

"Good," said the lawyer again. "Here's half a sovereign. Now go, and report to me as soon as you return."

The importance of this mysterious mission can only be seen by following in the footsteps of the departing clerk. That he is to act the part of a sleuth-hound is evident at once from his movements.

On reaching the dark landing of the narrow staircase, his first act was to look carefully about him. Being assured that he was alone, he struck a match, and by its flickering light read carefully the note given him in the office. This seemed a superfluous performance, with the sun shining outside ; but the detective knows his own business best. The next act of Mr. Mole was to pull off his trilby hat and tuck it behind the gas-meter, its place being supplied by a cloth cap drawn from a back trouser pocket. With the peak of this cap pulled well down over his eyes, and his coat collar turned up, Mole descended the staircase on tiptoe and reached the door. He looked up and down the court without turning his head, a feat only possible by turning the eyes till scarcely any part was visible but the whites. Apparently satisfied that all was well, he started off in the direction of St. Paul's, keeping to the sides with the same pertinacity that a mariner hugs the shore.

He avoided St. Paul's Churchyard, but kept to the narrow thoroughfare until he reached Paternoster Row, where he threaded his way through numerous courts and emerged on Ludgate Hill, near the Old Bailey. Giving a familiar nod to the old building, he darted across the road, and made his way along Water Lane to Upper Thames Street. Here a quick change was

effected, which consisted in pulling the cap-peak rakishly over one eye, undoing the bottom buttons of his waistcoat, and covering his collar with a shabby muffler. Then, producing a clay pipe, he slouched along for some distance, taking note of the buildings with apparent carelessness.

He halted before a gateway labelled "Iron Wharf," beneath which was the well-known name of Fairbrother. This was evidently Mr. Mole's destination, for he entered the gateway and walked towards the warehouse, where a number of vans were loading.

Inside the roomy ground floor stacks of iron gutters and rows of stoves lined the walls. Pulley wheels and new sinks lay in heaps, marked with mysterious chalk hieroglyphics. Trolleys trundled over the floor, and cries of "Below!" and "Take a turn!" resounded from the upper regions, where goods were being lowered to the vans.

"What are you after, mister?"

A bearded man in a disreputable-looking coat and a sack apron accosted Mole.

"Bit of old iron," said Mole. "That the way up?" nodding to a wooden staircase.

"That's the way until we get wings. What floor do you want?"

"Don't want a floor," said Mole; "got two at home. Guess again."

"P'raps you want something else?" said the man, looking hard at Mole's nose. "If so, you can have it."

"Thanks," said Mole. "I'll see you when I come down."

He ascended the staircase to the first floor. It appeared to be deserted, except for stacks of gas-stoves and iron mantel-pieces. Mole walked round and examined the mechanism of the cooking apparatus until a footstep sounded.

"Hallo, there," said a voice. "Want a stove?"

Another bearded and ragged ruffian appeared.

"How much?" asked Mole.

"What size do you want?"—pulling out a rule.

"Never mind about the size," said Mole.

"I'm looking for somebody."

"You won't find any one in there," said the man, as Mole opened a small oven door.

"Looking for a man name o' Bray," continued Mole.

"Jay? There's plenty of them about here. They're in every day, pulling the stuff about—tons of 'em."

"Almost as plentiful as whiskers, I suppose," said Mole. "Got a man here name o' Bray?"

The ragged salesman had turned to a small desk, and was poring deeply over a long order sheet marked "To-day certain" in bold writing.

"What d'yer think of that?" said Mole, producing a long cigar, and putting it on the desk. "Try it after dinner."

The man examined it closely and at a distance.

"Name o' Bray you said, didn't you?"

"Bray," said Mole.

"Don' know 'im," said the man. "No Bray here. It wouldn't be Wilkinson, I s'pose?"

Mole intimated with some heat that it was as likely to be Sasselovitch as Wilkinson.

"Bray, Bray, Bray. Don't mean Gray, do you?" said the man.

"Gray? Now, that's near it," said Mole. "I wonder if it could be Gray! Never seen the man myself, but a friend of mine in South Africa asked me to find him if I could when I got home. Is there a man here named Gray?"

"Down in the office," said the man.

"Ah! What sort of a chap is he, now? I didn't want to see him especially, I just want——"

"Tommy!"

A yell came from the yard below.

"Hallo!" said the whiskered man, shuffling to the goods door that overlooked the yard.

"Hallo there!"

There was no response.

"Here you are," he said suddenly to Mole. "That's Gray, going up the yard. Tail coat—see! Going out to lunch."

"Good," said Mole. "I think I'll go after him."

He scuttled down the stairs, and reached the street just as Gray turned up a court on the opposite side of the thoroughfare. Like a bloodhound, Mole followed him. Along Queen Victoria Street went the pair, the guileless Gray in front, his relentless pursuer twenty paces behind. Gray stopped at the windows of a typewriting establishment; Mole became absorbed in a new system of drainage displayed at an estate agent's. Gray went on a bit further, and stopped again; Mole did the same. Presently Gray, having dived into a passage, came out in Cannon Street and entered a restaurant; Mole waited long enough to stow away his pipe and muffler, turn down his collar and set the cloth cap at a proper elevation, and then followed.

Gray had seated himself at an unoccupied table in a cosy corner, and was reading the bill of fare. Mole proceeded with caution. Having hesitated between a seat near the front window and one by the fireplace, he finally settled himself opposite Gray at the same table.

Gray ordered a steak, and Mole decided on a chop. As the waiter was departing, Mole called him back and gave minute directions about the cooking, intimating at the same time that he would like something to drink.

A precocious youth with hair elaborately oiled and brushed rushed forward.

"Get me some whisky," said Mole; "and look here!"—eyeing him sternly—"I don't want any of your cheap wash. Ask for 'Tommy Morgan.'"

"You won't get that about here," said the boy, decisively. "Can get you 'Killarney' or 'McNab' or 'Jimmy Jenkins.'"

"Look here," said Mole, gripping his arm; "you can get 'Tommy Morgan' if you try. But it's no good you going to common public-houses. Try a high-class place, and remember that there's twopence for yourself. Cut off!"

"Isn't it a funny thing, now," said Mole, addressing his remarks to the cruet and Gray, "that I have all this trouble to get a drop of good whisky? Mind you"—boldly addressing Gray—"I don't wonder at it, for the price is high, and it isn't everybody that can appreciate the flavour of 'Tommy Morgan!' It knocks 'em over. It's all strength and flavour."

"Must be pretty good," said Gray.

"It is," said Mole, "to those who understand whisky. To others it's nothing out of the ordinary."

"They say 'McNab' is good stuff," ventured Gray.

"Ordinary men may drink 'McNab!'" said

Mole, picking up the *Times* and looking at it severely. "The whisky-drinker who has once tried 'Tommy Morgan' will never touch anything else. I've taken whisky since I was seven years old—was brought up on it; father drank it—grandfather too, and great-grandfather. We've been in the trade for generations. I don't suppose there's another man of my age who's a better judge of whisky than I am."

The precocious youth returned with the whisky in a tumbler.

"I got it, sir. Had to go to the Blue Crown. They charged a penny extra."

"Good," said Mole. "Now I can enjoy my dinner. If they'd charged a shilling for it," he said to Gray, speaking as a connoisseur, "it would have been worth the money."

He took a mouthful of the whisky-and-water, and closed his eyes with dreamy satisfaction. Gray called out to the retreating boy.

"How far do you have to go for whisky?" he asked.

"Not far, sir," said the boy. "Shan't be five minutes."

"Well, get me some whisky—the same," pointing to Mole's glass.

"I beg your pardon," said Mole, suddenly. "Allow me to say a word. Don't," lowering his voice, "don't take this unless you are used to

whisky. Don't take it merely as a spirit, either. But——" he put one finger on Gray's sleeve and paused significantly, "if you want flavour—*flavour*, then try it."

Gray did try it, and was obliged to confess that he didn't notice anything special about it. Mole was not surprised; in fact, he said that he should have been surprised if Gray had noticed the flavour. Whiskies like "Tommy Morgan" were an acquired taste, you had to get used to them. When once you were used to them—when once you were used to "Tommy Morgan," then——

"It's like nectar," said Mole, draining his glass.

Gray agreed that good whisky was hard to get, and confessed that he had tried many sorts in his time. He didn't drink it regularly, but liked it good when he did have it.

"I drink nothing else but 'Tommy,'" said Mole, in confidence; "and I carry it with me always. I've just been round the country, and have run out of it till I get home. Got heaps at home, my brother-in-law is a partner in the firm."

"I must try a bottle," said Gray; "where's the London office?"

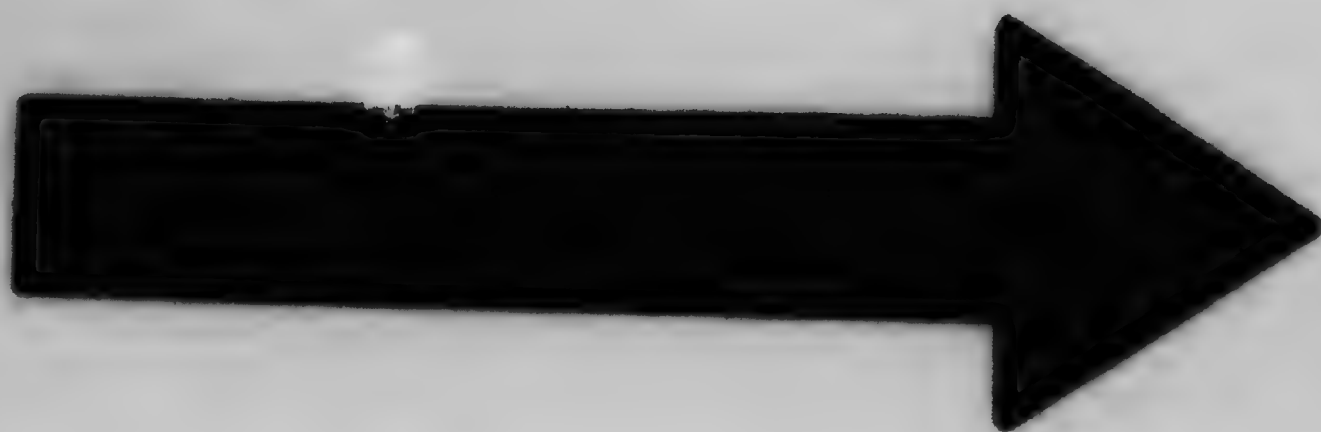
"No," said Mole, lifting his hand; "I introduced it. You must allow me to send you a

bottle free. Try that, and if you like it, order as many bottles as you please."

Gray and Mole parted with enthusiasm, Mole promising to send a bottle of "Tommy Morgan" to the address given him. Mole could not be certain when they would next meet, as he was off to Liverpool and Ireland the next day, and might be travelling for months.

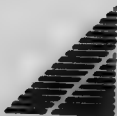
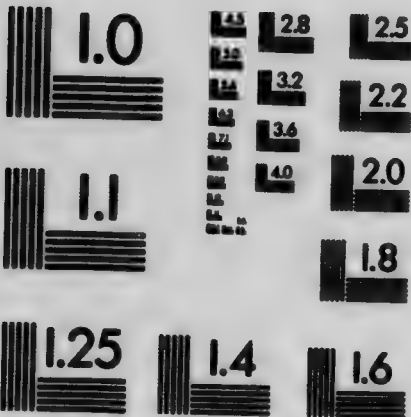
"Lucky meeting that," said Gray, as he went back to the office.

"What sort of man was he?" said Mrs. Gray, when she heard of the affable stranger. "Not very nice really I should think. Seems to me rather unlucky to meet a man named Mole on a Friday."



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CHAPTER XV—*Aunt Phoebe surprises her Nephew*

"O H, George dear, do be careful!" cried Mrs. Early.

"No harm done," said George.

"There is, you bad boy! You've upset the salt. Throw a bit over your left shoulder—quick!"

George obeyed.

"Coffee or tea, dear?"

"Coffee," said George, briskly; "plenty of it."

Mrs. Early took up the coffee-pot and put it down again quickly with an expression of horror.

"Oh, look what you've done now!" she cried.

"What? Upset the mustard?" said George.

"You've crossed the knives. Separate them; it's terribly unlucky."

Again George obeyed.

"It's made me quite nervous," said Mrs. Early, pouring out the coffee. "I'm sure something is going to happen. There!" as a spoon slipped off the table, "a stranger's coming!"

George looked across the table into the wide-open eyes of his wife.

"I know," he said intelligently: "it's the sweep; these chimneys are in a terrible state. I told Martha about it the other day."

"It isn't the sweep," said Mrs. Early; "it's a stranger who brings bad news. Something's happened."

George pondered for a moment, and then said—

"It must be that hat you sent to the milliner. Shop burnt out, I expect."

"It's worse than that," said Mrs. Early, pressing one hand cautiously to her heart. "I can feel it."

"You're right," said George, as he opened a letter brought in by Martha. "It's worse than that."

Mrs. Early grasped the table with both hands.

"Is it too bad for me to hear?" she whispered.

George leant his head upon one hand, and frowned heavily at the tablecloth.

"I suppose I'd better tell you," he said hoarsely. "Give me your hand. Are you calm now?"

"Quite," said Mrs. Early, shaking. "Tell me."

"Are you sure you won't faint?"

"I'll—I'll try not to."

"Then, lister," said George. "Your Aunt Phoebe is coming to stay with us."

He threw a letter across the table, and drew

back in time to dodge the serviette thrown by his indignant spouse.

"George," said Mrs. Early, tragically, "I hate you!"

"Then come and give me a kiss," said George.

For answer Mrs. Early tossed her head, which necessitated her husband's going round the table to kiss her. This he continued to do until his wife reversed her decision.

"And yet," said Mrs. Early, "I can't get over the feeling that something is going to happen."

George looked up with the light of intelligence in his eyes.

"What is it?" said his wife.

"Perhaps Martha's going to give notice. I've seen a soldier hanging ?' at the front lately, and she asked me yesterday if the flats in the suburbs were very dear?"

Mrs. Early gasped, and closed her mouth ominously.

"That must be it," she said in a terrible whisper.

"Don't worry," said George; "it hasn't happened yet."

As he left for Upper Thames Street his wife told him brightly that she believed that Martha was quite safe, as she had asked to have her bedroom whitewashed at Christmas.

"Funny creatures, women," thought George, as he bowled along in a hansom to the office. "Always getting some queer notions in their heads, always making mountains out of mole-hills. Good creatures, too," he mused. "Only got to be fond of 'em and tell 'em so, and they're ready to do anything for you. Well, I'm a lucky brute!"

The last thought was sufficiently good for George for the rest of the journey, and it was still strong upon him as he looked round the magnificent room he occupied at Fairbrothers'.

"Big and roomy," said he, standing with his back to the fire; "warm, cosy, and comfortable. Easy-chairs, cigars, drinks, and amusement in the shape of work. After work, a gorgeous house in Kensington, a good dinner, and a charming wife to talk to. What more could a man wish for?"

He lit a cigarette and looked about him.

"I took to this room from the first, something seemed to draw me to it; it's been my lucky room from the very beginning. I didn't think on the morning I came up here and overheard that little conversation that it was going to be the foundation of my fortune. It was a Friday, too, if I remember rightly. That's one for the people who say that Friday isn't a lucky day."

A knock came at the door, and Gray entered.

"Ah, Gray," said George, seating himself at

a desk, "I was ruminating over things when you entered and broke the spell."

"I've got something to ruminate over myself," said Gray, bitterly. "I want to have a little talk with you."

George looked up and waited for him to continue.

"You needn't look so innocent," said Gray; "you can't bluff me now. I'm used to it."

George raised his eyebrows, and endeavoured to find a solution to the mystery in the countenance of his visitor.

"Have a good look," said Gray, "so that you'll know me again."

"I know you, Gray," said his master, pleasantly, "and I must remind you that I am the principal of this establishment. If you have any complaint to lodge you had better make it by letter. My time is precious."

"It was a low-down trick," said Gray, fiercely.

He began to pace up and down the apartment.

"What's a low-down trick? Explain yourself."

"Oh, don't come that game with me," said Gray, irritably. "You've been giving me away, and you know it!"

"I don't," said George. "I beg your pardon, Gray, but I don't know it."

"Do you mean to say you haven't been putting

the lawyers on my track?" he asked in a terrible voice.

"Lawyers? What lawyers?"

Gray snatched a blue paper from his pocket, and threw it on the table.

"Look at that," he demanded, "and then get out of it if you can!"

George Early picked up the paper and read—

"To Mr. James Gray.

"WARNING!

"SIR,

"We are empowered under the will of the late Joseph Fairbrother to give you fair warning that you are not abiding by the rules of the agreement under which you received a legacy from the said gentleman hereinbefore mentioned. It having come to our knowledge that you, in the presence of a witness, did partake of alcoholic liquor on a date subsequent to that on which the legacy came into operation, you are hereby *warned* to discontinue the practice under pain of losing the said legacy, and forfeiting all moneys forthwith.

"We are, sir,

"Yours faithfully,

"DIBBS & DUBBS.

"FIRST WARNING."

George turned over the paper and stared at it.

"Well, I'm hanged!" he said.

"What are you going to do about it?" asked Gray, sullenly.

"Do?" said George. "Nothing. Gray," he continued quietly, "upon my soul I haven't breathed a word of your secret to any person but yourself. Somebody must have told the lawyers, but, believe me, I had no hand in it."

"Then who is it?" said Gray.

"Perhaps the lawyers themselves are doing it."

"They've left me alone previously. Why should they begin now? If I find the man who did it," said Gray in a low, terrible voice, "Heaven help him!"

It was not possible to tell Mrs. Gray of this misfortune, so her husband, to account for his worried look, was forced to give out that he had lost the secretaryship of the Old Friends' Club. Some miscreant had libelled him and declared that he was a great drinker, and the club handed over the secretaryship to a temperance member.

"Just what I thought," said Mrs. Gray, sorrowfully; "Friday's an unlucky day, Jimmy; and when you told me his name, I had a creepy feeling all over me. I'm not surprised."

"What are you talking about?" said her husband, irritably. "Told you whose name?"

"Why, that man, Jimmy; 'Mould,' wasn't it?"

Gray smothered a profane word. "The skulking hound! Why, of course, he's the man who did it. Let me set eyes on him again. Him and his wonderful 'Tommy Morgan.' I'll give him 'Tommy Morgan'—I'll break his head!"

"Oh, Jimmy, do be careful of yourself!" pleaded little Mrs. Gray.

"I'll be right enough, Em. I'll give him 'Tommy Morgan'!"

Gray kept a keen eye open for the versatile Mole, but he never appeared again in the Cannon Street restaurant; nor was Gray sharp enough to catch a glimpse of him in St. Paul's Passage, although he haunted that place in a revengeful spirit for some days.

Probably a week of temperance and an abnormal sense of safety were responsible for the warning to taste liquor that seized Gray one evening as he returned home. He determined to try his luck, so instead of journeying to Leytonstone he got out at Stratford, and struck off into a by-street. Having traversed one street after another, looking cautiously behind him at intervals, he selected an ill-lighted public-house and slipped into the private bar. Luck favoured him, the compartment was quite empty.

The stiff glass of whisky-and-water seemed the sweetest he had ever tasted, it warmed the heart and left a delightful flavour in the mouth. As Gray turned to depart, the partition shook, and a cough arrested his attention. He looked up and saw the face of Mole peering over the top.

Gray was furious. All the enmity he had engendered in the past week appeared in full force at a second's command. He rushed to the door of the next compartment. It was empty. He tried the next bar, and caught sight of a figure disappearing down the street. As Gray followed, the man began to run. It was an exciting chase, but Mole was too slippery for his pursuer, and Gray, after a vigorous hunt, was forced to confess himself beaten.

When George Early went through his morning letters an officious-looking blue envelope happened to be on the top. It bore the mark of Dibbs and Dubbs, and was addressed to "James Gray, Esq." It had evidently been put there by mistake.

George called a boy and sent the letter downstairs. Later in the day he was able, by careful observation, to conclude that Gray had received a second warning from the lawyers.

"For Mrs. Gray's sake," said George to himself, "I must see into this matter. It won't do for Gray to lose that legacy. I must talk to him

seriously—threaten him, if necessary. He'll be careful for a few days; I'll wait, and when he's in the right mood point out the terrible consequences of his keeping to the drink."

With this virtuous resolution George Early dismissed the question, but bethought himself to mention it at the dinner-table that evening.

"Gray has had his second warning," he said, looking across at Aunt Phoebe. "I've given him plenty of advice. I suppose I shall have to threaten him now."

Aunt Phoebe looked very cross, and said that she really had no patience with men.

"Well, it serves him right, that's all I can say. I shouldn't threaten him. Let him go on. It's to your interest; it will punish him to lose the money, and I'm not sure that it won't do you some good to have it. I really think you'd be better as a teetotaler, too."

"What's all that to do with Gray?" asked George in astonishment. "For goodness' sake turn over to me all your knowledge of the complications of these Fairbrother wills and legacies. I'm continually getting surprises."

"I thought you knew all the complications of the legacies," said Aunt Phoebe, raising her eyebrows.

"It seems to me that I don't," said George.

"Why, don't you know that if Mr. Gray loses

his legacy, it reverts to you, and that you get the money, and have to abide by the conditions as he did?"

"WHAT!"

George leapt out of his seat like a man shot, and had to hold the table to steady himself. His wife and aunt shrieked simultaneously.

"What's that you say!" roared George. "Me take the legacy? Me be a teetotaller, and take over the—the——"

He sat down in his seat at the earnest request of his aunt, who declared that he ought to be ashamed of himself to frighten his poor darling wife by roaring like a lion.

"I don't understand," said George, in a dazed fashion. "Me take the—Gray lose his legacy, and me take it?"

Mrs. Early having recovered and scolded her "naughty boy," Aunt Phoebe begged her nephew to be calm, and repeated her former statement. It was quite correct; if the legacies were lost while Miss Fairbrother remained unmarried, they were to go to charities, but in the event of Miss Fairbrother being married the legacies, together with the conditions, would revert to her husband. It was Mr. Fairbrother's express wish, because he said his daughter's husband might need reforming, and if he didn't there would be no harm done.

"Very kind of him," said George; "and what about the husband? I suppose he can't lose the legacies—he's got them for life?"

"No," said Aunt Phoebe; "if he loses them the money goes to charities."

George gave a sigh of relief. "I'm afraid I should lose them," he said. "However, it wouldn't much matter?"

It was Aunt Phoebe's turn to be surprised. "Wouldn't much matter, do you say?" she almost shrieked. "Do you mean to tell me that you don't know all the terrible conditions attached to these legacies?"

George turned pale, and his wife was threatened with hysterics.

"What are the conditions?" asked George, hoarsely.

Aunt Phoebe rose to her feet.

"The conditions," she said, in an awesome voice, "are these: If the legacies revert to you, and you lose them, the Fairbrother fortune goes too. *Every penny of your wife's income goes to charities!*"

George Early's jaw dropped, and he sat in a helpless heap. His little wife burst into tears.

Presently George roused himself and took a glass of wine.

"Aunt Phoebe," he said; "did Old Fairbrother

put those conditions in his will with regard to the three legacies?"

"I have said so," was the reply. "They were entirely the idea of Mr. Joseph Fairbrother himself."

"Then all I can say," said George—"all I can say is that he was a SILLY OLD FOOL!"

CHAPTER XVI—*George Early and the Giant Alcohol*

MASTER CACKLIN was perched upon a high stool, eagerly devouring a report of the match between Teddy Sneffler and The Midget, for the Bantam championship, when a succession of soft squeaky footsteps fell on his ear. As they ascended the stairs he turned his head. The paper was quickly thrust into his desk, and the Cacklin pen began to move with marvellous rapidity.

A bell rang, loudly and impatiently.

"Who's that?" said William Budd, appearing from an obscure corner.

"Guvnor," said Cacklin. "Upstairs—sharp!"

"Who said the guvnor was here?" inquired Busby, coming forward and looking at the clock, which pointed to a quarter past nine.

"It's right enough," said Cacklin; "just come in. Something on the board, I expect."

William Budd entered the upstairs room with that feeling of suppressed excitement which always arises when the "guvnor" appears in the office an hour before his usual time.

"I want Mr. Gray," said George, sharply.

"Yes, sir." The boy disappeared.

In five minutes he reappeared. "Mr. Gray's out, sir."

"Say I want him as soon as he comes in."

"Yes, sir."

George fingered the letters on his desk, looked at the post-marks, and put them down without opening any. He walked to the window and stood for five minutes looking at the traffic outside. His usual imperturbability had deserted him to-day, chased away by the events of the previous evening. He walked up and down the big office, lit a cigarette, and paused at intervals to look in the mirror over the mantelshelf.

"Lucky thing I got that information last night," he said presently. "That ass Gray is sure to make a fool of himself unless I take him in hand—sure to do it. And that old idiot, too! 'Legacies revert to his daughter's husband.' Never heard of such rot in my life."

He touched the bell again, and again the surprised Budd appeared.

"Mr. Gray," said George.

"Not come back, sir," said the boy.

"Find him—find him!" said the new master.

"When did he go out—how long ago?"

"Dunno, sir," said the boy.

"Find out. Be sharp!"

The offices below were aroused into activity by the peremptory orders to find Gray. William

George Early and the Giant Alcohol 195

Budd's version of his brief interview created some excitement. He described George Early as walking up and down the office with arms waving, and eyes starting from his head. He ordered Gray to be found, dead or alive. Budd was not sure that he didn't see a revolver lying on the desk.

Ten o'clock struck, but no Gray appeared. Office-boys and junior clerks had spurted east and west. Nobody knew where Gray had gone, and there appeared to be no reason why he should leave the office. He might have gone out on the firm's business, but if so nobody knew of it. Wild were the conjectures as to what was in store for him when he returned, and why he had disappeared.

At lunch-time Gray was still absent, and the latest news in the counting-house was that the "guvnor" had gone out to lunch with a slow, firm step, and a Napoleonic sternness of brow.

While this excitement was rife in Upper Thames Street, Mrs. Gray was busy with her work in the little Leytonstone house. If her husband had important business of his own to transact, it was clear she did not know it. She had just put up a pair of clean curtains to the front window, and lovingly caressed a pink bow that held one of them back, when a sharp knock came at the front door.

Mrs. Gray opened it, and started back in surprise. "Well, I never! This is a surprise! How do you do, Mr. Early? Won't you come in?"

George Early did go in. Moreover, he shook hands, and said that it was a pleasure to him to find Mrs. Gray looking so well. His smile was perhaps not so brilliant as of yore, but Mrs. Gray put that down to the worries of managing a large business, and the severity necessary to his position.

Mrs. Gray thought it very kind of her old lodger not to forget his landlady. She hoped Mrs. Early was well. George was pleased to say that Mrs. Early was in excellent health and spirits.

"And how are you getting on now?" said George, when he had passed as lightly as possible over his change of position. "You have another lodger, I suppose?"

Mrs. Gray was sorry to say that she hadn't. Jimmy was very well, but some horrid person had accused him of drinking, and he had lost the secretaryship of the club.

"It's a shame!" said George. "But, between ourselves, I'm afraid there's some truth in it."

"Truth in what?" said Mrs. Gray, fearfully.

"He drinks," said George, solemnly. "Now, what did he have this morning?"

"Nothing but his breakfast," cried Mrs. Gray.
"He had his breakfast and went off as usual."

"Good," thought George; "then he isn't here?"

"The fact is," he said, "I came down especially to see you about this. He must be got to sign the pledge, and we must keep the closest watch upon him to see that he never takes anything."

"Is it so bad as that?" said Mrs. Gray, with wide-open eyes.

"It is," said George, mysteriously, "for you."

"What do you mean?" said Mrs. Gray.

"He has always been a friend of mine," said George, absently, "and I'll never let it be said that I haven't stretched out a hand to help him. Besides, he doesn't do it of his own accord, as you may say. And it isn't as if you weren't a good wife to him, because I know that you are."

"Whatever is the matter?" cried Mrs. Gray, clasping her hands frantically.

"He must sign the pledge," said George again. "You're a good wife to him, and he doesn't do it willingly."

"Doesn't do what?"—wildly.

George laid one hand upon Mrs. Gray's sleeve, and looked steadily into her eyes.

"Does he ever talk in his sleep?" he asked.

"I don't think so—not much. I haven't noticed."

"Never mentions the name Flora, Alice, or May, I suppose?"

"I don't think—you don't mean to say——"

"Never speaks of Christabel—Chrissy, does he?"

Mrs. Gray burst into tears. George sighed, and tried to comfort her by little pats on the shoulder.

"There, there; you mustn't blame him," he said. "It isn't his fault, you know."

Mrs. Gray cried louder, and her little form shook with emotion.

"He—he goes with other girls. I k-know he does!" she cried. "Oh! oh! oh!"

"'Tisn't Jimmy," said George, soothingly. "It's the whisky."

"Oh! oh!" cried Mrs. Gray. "He—he goes with other girls!"

"He doesn't," said George, boldly. "I won't hear it. You shan't blame him. It isn't fair!"

Mrs. Gray grew calmer, but still continued to sob. She was always prepared to back up the opinions of George, whom she held to be a man of excellent qualities, with an idolatrous affection for her husband.

"It isn't fair that you should go against him

when he is not to blame," said George. "You should save him from them."

Mrs. Gray wiped her eyes meekly.

"What you must do," said George, "is to insist on his signing the pledge. That's the only way. And you must make him promise you never to touch another drop of drink. When he's had a glass he's a different man, and isn't responsible for his actions."

"Does it—does it make him look at other girls?" asked Mrs. Gray, tremblingly.

"It does," said George. "You've guessed it at once. It makes him terribly affectionate, too. Why, when Alice—you see, it's a very peculiar disease, very common in Turkey. As soon as you begin to drink, you get an idea that every girl's in love with you. And the worst of it is that a man might propose without knowing it. Now, Flora—well, the only thing for him to do is to sign the pledge and keep it."

"He shall sign it to-morrow," said Mrs. Gray, firmly.

"I shouldn't let him know that I've been here," said George. "He'll only worry himself, thinking there's something wrong with his work."

"Who's Flora?" asked Mrs. Gray, the fierce light of jealousy kindling in her eye.

"Don't you bother about her. She won't come down here."

"She'd better not," said Mrs. Gray, with compressed lips. "I'd give her Flora—or May—or Chrissy, if she came here!"

"I believe you would," said George, with admiration.

"I'll smash every whisky-bottle in the place," said Mrs. Gray, whose indignation was now rising to fever pitch. "Not another drop shall he touch if I know it! I'll soon see about Flora!"

George prepared to depart, perfectly satisfied that his mission had been a success. He took the hand of his old landlady, and said, with some emotion—

"Don't be too hard on him. You don't know how—how it cuts me to the heart to see him do wrong. But remember that he's my old chum. Together we'll drag him away from this curse. He's my chum and your husband—the best fellow that ever lived. Let us save him, and be gentle to him at the same time. Good-bye, good-bye!"

George wrung her hand, and hurried off, to all appearances only just in time to prevent the tears coming.

Mrs. Gray looked after him down the street, and felt her heart glow.

"Ah, Jimmy," she murmured, shaking her head, "you don't realize how much that friend has done for you!"

George travelled back to the office, and reached it just as the office staff was preparing to give up work for the day.

"I suppose Gray's here," he said, summoning a junior clerk. "What time did he get back?"

The clerk coughed discreetly. "'Fraid he hasn't come back yet, sir," he said.

"Send Mr. Busby to me."

The youth departed.

"Not back yet!" said George, looking hard at the fireplace. "I wonder what he's up to. If the lunatic is out drinking, they'll be on his track, as sure as Fate. Busby," he said, as the cashier entered, "what has become of Gray?"

Busby could give no solution to the problem. "He put on his hat and went off about half-past eight," he said. "I didn't notice anything peculiar about him, except that he swore rather more than usual. I noticed that he looked several times at a blue paper he got by this morning's post, and——"

"What!" yelled the master, springing out of his chair.

"A blue paper," repeated Busby, dodging behind the desk in alarm.

George grasped him by the collar fiercely. "You say he got a blue paper this morning!" he cried.

"Y-yes," said Busby, promptly putting himself in the defensive.

George cast him off. "Enough!" he said. "Go!"

"It was a blue envelope," said Busby, "and when he opened it——"

"Go, will you!"

"There was a long blue paper inside," said the cashier, moving across the carpet. "So I——"

George picked up a heavy bill file and flung it just as Busby skipped out of the door.

"He's done it!—the silly, stupid idiot has done it, and it's on me! And I've been down to his house and made a fool of myself!"

On arriving at Brunswick Terrace George Early's fears were confirmed by the sight of a formidable blue envelope addressed to himself. A document inside set forth the fact, in legal phraseology, that James Gray had forfeited his claim to the Fairbrother's annuity, and that the said annuity had now fallen to Mr. George Early, husband of Ellen Fairbrother. The said George Early was duly warned of the terrible issues at stake, consequent upon his not observing the rules of the legacy, the aforesaid issues leading to the ultimate forfeiture of the Fairbrother estates by the said George Early's wife.

"Well, I'm a teetotaller now," said George, resignedly. "There's no getting out of it."

"It's better for you," said Aunt Phœbe. "I never did believe in drink."

"Nobody asked you to," said her nephew. "I don't believe in it. I take it for my health."

Nevertheless, he interviewed the smart young lawyer at Dibbs and Dubbs, who confirmed everything that had been said on the forfeiture of the estate.

"We shall watch you closely," he said brightly to George, rubbing his hands. "On behalf of the trustees of the 'VERY DARK AFRICAN MISSION,' who will benefit by the estate, I am directed to watch—you—very—closely."

"That's right," said George. "You keep your eye on me. I wish you luck!"

CHAPTER XVII—*Advice Gratis*

GRAY appeared at his desk the next morning at his usual hour. The office learned in due course that he had had some trouble and had taken a day off. The loss of an annuity of five hundred pounds a year did not appear to weigh on him so heavily as might have been supposed. At half-past ten he went upstairs, in response to a request for his presence.

George Early was occupying his accustomed place, perhaps a little paler than usual, but very intent on business.

"You sent for me," said Gray.

"I did," said his master. "I should like you to explain your strange absence from business yesterday."

Gray grinned. "I was burying my grandmother," he said.

He received a look of severe reproof. "I believe I am right in assuming that you were out making a beast of yourself," said George.

"I was out with Flora," replied Gray.

George coughed and became interested in a letter.

"As you did not turn up yesterday," he explained, "I felt it my duty to inquire about

you. In the interests of yourself and your wife I endeavoured to do you a good turn."

"Thanks," said Gray. "I'll do the same for you when the time comes."

"Go back to your work," ordered his master, "and don't let it occur again."

"It's no good asking you to have a drink, I suppose?" said Gray.

George Early turned pale and swore softly. "I suppose you know all," he said.

"Everything," Gray confessed. "You're not the only artful one in the firm."

"I'll sack you if you're not careful," cried George.

Gray laughed. He opened the door to go out, but paused on the threshold.

"Keep your eye on the other two," he said significantly.

George rested awhile from his labours, in order to curse for the hundredth time the imbecility of the late venerable head of the firm. The worst of a legacy such as he was blessed with was that nobody but himself realized the hardships of it. When he grumbled his wife soothed him with soft words; but he knew that in her heart she believed it was good for him to be a teetotaller.

What troubled him more than this was the terrible probability of receiving fifteen hundred pounds a year instead of five hundred. If

Parrott and Busby should fail as Gray had done, and the three legacies came to him, life would not be worth living. He must make his plans at once, without a moment's delay.

The rest of the morning was devoted to a straight talk with Busby, in which George pointed out that having taken the place of the late venerable head of the firm, he was prepared to adhere to his principles. He exhorted Busby to shun the ways of the untruthful as he would a fiery furnace, and to walk henceforth among those who were honest. He promised to forward without delay a life-sized portrait of George Washington, which Busby might hang in his bedroom.

Parrott was treated to a similar discourse, and urged to respond with alacrity to all requests for pecuniary assistance.

"Generosity," said George, sagely, "is its own reward. It is sinful to have money and to keep it to ourselves. Let us give it to those who are poor, especially when they ask for it."

For the better safety of their master's interests the two legatees were informed that the lawyers had at last woke up, and had terrible sleuth-hounds on their track, under whose deadly eyes Gray had fallen a victim.

The next morning the office staff, on taking up their duties, were electrified to see the walls

of the building adorned with the newest of religious texts, including such good counsel as "Honesty is the best policy," "Tell the truth and shame the devil," "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

"Seems to me," observed Cacklin, "that the boss is going to start a Sunday School, and he wants us all to join his class."

"Perhaps they're put up to give the new chap a good start," said William Budd.

"What new chap?"

"Chap in Matthews' place."

"Matthews gone?"

"Got a new job," explained Billy; "asked the boss if his cousin could take his place here. There's the new feller. See?"

"He's a nice piece of pie-crust," said Cacklin, critically. "Here!" He called to the youth, who stood awkwardly near the doorway. "What name?"

"Bailey, sir," replied the youth.

"Any relation to Old Bailey?" inquired Cacklin.

Billy grinned.

"No, sir," said the youth.

"All right," said Cacklin; "wait over there. Decent sort of chap," he remarked, flattered by the youth's respectful attitude.

This opinion was echoed throughout the office

during the three following days. On the fourth, Busby received a blue envelope from Dibbs and Dubbs. On the fifth, Bailey met a friend outside the office at closing time, and pointed out to him the form of Parrott wending his way to Blackfriars, whereupon the friend immediately left Bailey and went also to Blackfriars. Three days after this incident, Parrott himself received a blue letter from the lawyers.

Energetic as was George Early, these incidents passed without his notice, illustrating the truth of the adage about the best laid schemes of mice and men going "aft agley." Not that he was negligent, the personal attention he gave to the head clerk and the cashier was quite pathetic. They lunched with him, had tea in his private office, and frequently went to Brunswick Terrace to dinner. Sometimes the master would even accompany them home.

Busby was promoted to the post of private secretary at an increased salary, and a great deal of Parrott's time was spent upstairs in the big office. At intervals, Mr. George Early sent them little gifts of books, wherein the value of truth on the one hand, and generosity on the other, were set forth.

If George Early had only known the qualities of the new head of Dibbs and Dubbs, things might have been different. That energetic

young man, intent upon earning the fees due to him, and with a keen eye to future business, shadowed the legatees everywhere. George found it a comparatively easy matter to keep to temperance with so much at stake, but Busby, conscious of his own defects and the pernicious results of habit, hardly dared to open his mouth. Parrott, too, was sorely tried by the constant demands on his purse, and the mind-raking trials of sorting out spies from "hard-ups."

Arriving early one morning at the office, the principal discovered among the letters two of the fatal blue envelopes. They were addressed to Busby and Parrott. With feverish haste he awaited the two subordinates, and then learned with indignation that these were the second warnings of each.

"To think," said George, addressing his crest-fallen secretary, "that after all the trouble I've taken you couldn't keep an honest tongue in your head. Of course, it's of no consequence to me, except that I shall be sorry to see you lose the money."

"It's easy to make a mistake," faltered Busby.

"Easy be hanged!" replied his master. "You should have been careful. Come in!" as a knock sounded.

A boy entered, and said, "Gentleman to see you, sir."

"Can't see any one now," said George, irritably. "You go, Busby, and see who it is. Say I'll see him later."

Busby went gloomily down the stairs. The warning had cast a black cloud over his prospects, and his nerves, never under perfect control, were in an unsatisfactory condition. Only those who experience a sudden accession to wealth can adequately realize the sensation of feeling that it is going to be as suddenly snatched away. At the present moment he would have welcomed a snug log cabin in an uninhabited island, where the absence of people would preclude the necessity of lying. A tall stranger came forward as he reached the lower office.

"Are you Mr. Early?" he asked.

"No," said Busby, "you——"

"I wanted to see him," said the stranger.

"Fact is," replied the cashier, "he's not here. Can you call again about eleven?"

The stranger smiled, and pulled out a card-case.

"Yes," said Busby, taking the card absently. "I'll make an appointment for you at eleven."

The stranger departed, and Busby carried the piece of cardboard upstairs.

"What's this?" said George, glancing at the card. "Dibbs and Dubbs."

Busby let fall the inkstand he was lifting, and

grasped the desk with both hands. The two men stared at each other.

"I've done it," said Busby, feebly, dropping back in a chair; "it's all over." He laughed hysterically and wiped away some moisture from one eye. "It's all over," he repeated in a silly, stupid way.

"Speak out," said George, hoarsely, trying to shake off a numbness that was creeping over him. "What have you done? What have you done? Out with it!"

"Told him—told him you were not here."

It is safe to say that the flow of profanity delivered by the new master of Fairbrothers' on receiving this intelligence was such as had never before resounded in the chief office during the firm's existence. Busby was too intent on his own loss to take much heed of it, or to wonder why the loss of five hundred pounds a year to his secretary should have such an effect on George Early, master of thousands. He lay back in a limp heap, feebly repeating at intervals, "I've done it; it's all over."

Animated by a faint hope that all was not lost, George summoned the office-boy. That youth, with quick intelligence and some pride, confessed that he had "told the gentleman Mr. Early was upstairs." As a reward Mr. Early swore at him, and sacked him on the spot.

An hour later the worried ironmonger sat alone in the big room. He had dispensed with his secretary's services for the rest of the day, and had given strict orders that no one was to be admitted to his presence. The appalling significance of his position was beginning to dawn upon him. Already he had two of the legacies, and the third was obviously a mere matter of time.

"You can't knock sense into the heads of these brutes," he reflected bitterly; "they don't understand generosity. Parrott'll go down as sure as my name's George."

He sat upright and tried to review the situation. A stiff glass of brandy would have been a help, but that was out of the question. This second legacy, of which he would probably receive notice in the morning, was ten times worse than the first. All his life George had been accustomed to equivocation, and to bind himself to speaking the whole truth and nothing but the truth was like asking him to keep his eyes shut for the rest of his life. He regretted the afternoons he had stayed away from Sunday School. He was positive that he would fail. And the third legacy would be even more appalling than the other two, for there was no doubt that the secret would get out. Gray, Busby, and Parrott would be sure to get news of all three, and Heaven knows how

many more people besides, and then he would be simply besieged for money. It would be an impossible situation, and most unjust. He could see a most disastrous end to all his schemes. Himself brought to poverty, and with him a wife who had been reared in luxury.

The representative of Dibbs and Dubbs did not appear at eleven o'clock, so George decided to leave the stuffy atmosphere of Upper Thames Street and cool his brow on a Thames steamboat. Before leaving he confided to Parrott in the strictest confidence the calamity that had befallen his colleague, and urged him, while there was yet time, to reform.

"Give," said George, strenuously, "with a free hand. I know it's hard for you to do it, but do it. And look here"—as a brilliant thought struck him—"I'll stand half the debts, just to help you to get over the habit of refusing."

He went away more pleased than he had hoped to be. It really was a good idea that, and he could well afford it. Parrott did not look very hopeful in spite of the generous offer; probably he had less faith in himself, knowing himself better.

"Maybe," thought George, as he wended his way along Upper Thames Street, "I shall be able to think of some scheme to dodge all this. I used to have a few ideas at one time. I suppose

there's some one on my track from the infernal lawyers now."

He turned round sharply, and served a young man stop and bend a searching gaze on a bill announcing property for sale.

"That's the man. I must be careful to do the George Washington act, and stick hard to temperance principles." As he proceeded on his way, the young man, who was no other than the relentless Mole, carefully followed him.

It was late in the afternoon when he returned to Brunswick Terrace. During his wanderings he had not been able to shake off his pursuer, who tarried on the opposite side of the road as he entered the house. As he expected, a legal document awaited him, announcing the reversion of the second legacy.

"What a shame!" cried Mrs. Early, hotly, when she heard the news. "I do think papa might have shown a little more feeling."

"More feeling, my dear?" Aunt Phoebe bristled up. "Really, I'm surprised at you. For my part, I rejoice, and I can't understand why your husband doesn't do so. Surely it is a blessing to know that one is always telling the truth."

"Oh, I'm overwhelmed with joy," groaned George—"never felt happier in my life."

"We shall all be pleased, I think, to feel that

we can rely on every word you say," said Aunt Phœbe, quietly.

"Ah," said George, "it's different here. Of course, at home it doesn't count. It isn't like——"

His aunt held up her hands. "I beg your pardon," she said; "I must differ. I give you warning; I must differ. It would be far from my wish to have to say a word that would injure either of you, but in the interests of truth and justice——"

"Truth and justice be hanged!"

"In the interests of truth and justice," persisted Aunt Phœbe, "I should be compelled—compelled to speak."

Mrs. Early burst into tears and cried, "Oh, Aunt Phœbe, how can you be so horrid!"

George protested in most vehement language, but Aunt Phœbe was firm.

"I couldn't sleep at night," she said, "for feeling that I had acted wrongfully. No, I couldn't do it."

"Well, I'd sooner you kept awake," said George, unfeelingly, "if you can't trust yourself."

Aunt Phœbe prepared to serve tea, and said curiously—

"I wonder that the habit of truth was not grounded in you when you were a Sunday School teacher. May I ask how many scholars you had?"

"You may not," replied her nephew, irritably. Why the devil did she want to remind him of that bit of polite fiction!

Aunt Phoebe looked meaningly at her niece. "Were you ever a Sunday School teacher?" she said, boldly continuing the attack.

"No!" blurted out George.

"There!" She folded her arms and looked again at her niece, whose sobs began afresh.

"Did you ever——"

"Oh, give me some tea," cried the wretched man. "I'm not going to sit here and be catechized like this."

"In the interests of my niece I demand it," continued his relentless aunt; "how many lives did you save before that affair in Regent Street?"

"I can't remember," said George, sullenly. "My memory's bad."

Aunt Phoebe smiled triumphantly. George proceeded to drink his tea in silence.

"I suppose," continued the old lady, "you never fell in love with any young ladies before you met my niece? Never took them up the river, and——"

George groaned and clapped his hand to his head.

"It's coming on," he said hoarsely.

Mrs. Early ran to him at once. "What is it, darling?" she cried.

"Let me get to the couch," said George in a low voice; "take my arm."

"Is it your poor head?" asked his wife, anxiously.

George groaned again. "I think it's a fit coming on."

"Oh, let me get the doctor. Aunt, send for the doctor—quick!"

"I don't think the doctor is needed," said Aunt Phoebe, pursing her lips. "If it gets worse we can throw some cold water over him."

"It isn't so bad as that," said George, hastily. "It's—it's my head."

"Poor, poor head!" said Mrs. Early, smoothing his hair.

"The truth's been too much for him," said Aunt Phoebe.

"Aunt, how can you!" cried Mrs. Early, tearfully. "I'm sure George is very, very unwell."

He managed to squeeze out another groan.

"Perhaps he'd better have some more tea," said Aunt Phoebe. "What is it?" to a maid who had entered.

"Letter for the master, ma'am."

"Another blue envelope," said Aunt Phoebe, taking the letter.

George looked up and stifled a curse. "Don't open it," he said. "I know what it is."

What could it be but the third and final

legacy. He burst into a profuse perspiration, and smothered his wrath in the cushions of the sofa.

"Is oo better now, dearie?" asked his wife.

George raised himself into a sitting position. "It's gone off a bit," he said. "I think I'll go out and walk it off." A new idea had come into his head, and he wanted solitude to think it over.

"I shouldn't go out, dearie," advised Mrs. Early, anxiously. "Your poor head might get bad again."

George kissed her and summoned up a feeble smile.

"It's better now, pet," he said; "a walk will just put me right."

He took the blue letter into the hall and opened it. It was as he suspected. Parrott had evidently had the third warning that morning, and not the second.

Outside George found the patient figure of Mole taking careful observation. He appeared not to notice him, but turned away in the direction of Hyde Park. The cool air revived him, and he sat listening to the band for half an hour. Finding in its music no solution to the problems confronting him, he turned out of the gate and strolled along Piccadilly.

"It was in this neighbourhood that I did the heroic act and let myself in for this," thought

George. "I only wish I could find a way out of it here."

Food was necessary to keep up his strength, so he entered the Café Royal and ordered a sumptuous dinner. The indefatigable sleuth-hound did likewise at a respectful distance.

"Now," thought George, as he emerged with the satisfied feeling that only a good dinner can give, "now I must try to think it out. I had luck in this spot before—if you can call it luck. Perhaps I'll get the same again."

But the goddess of fortune failed to appear, nor did George succeed in meeting her during his subsequent two hours' stroll. All his own ideas went down before the ingenious complications conceived by the late head of the Fairbrother firm.

He sighed deeply as he stood on the doorstep at Brunswick Terrace searching for his latch-key. The sigh was succeeded by a smile. Before inserting the key in the lock George turned and looked thoughtfully at a ghostly figure on the other side of the road.

"Well," he said with a valiant attempt at hilarity, "I'll try being good for a time, and see how that works."

CHAPTER XVIII—*The Disadvantages of trying to be Good*

AT breakfast next morning Mr. George Early was a model of politeness and urbanity. His courteousness obtruded itself so much that Aunt Phœbe could scarcely refrain from remarking upon it. After watching him closely, she decided that the night had effected one of those great changes sometimes observable in men after a crisis. He had turned over a new leaf.

Without delay she put this to the test. "I suppose," she remarked, smiling pleasantly at her nephew, "that I may rely upon you for a ten-pound subscription to the 'Friendly Friday Evenings for Mothers Society?'"

George was all attention at once. "Most certainly," he said. "I'm very glad you mentioned it. A noble institution."

"I'm pleased to hear you say that," said his aunt. "You were not always on the Society's side, and I'm glad to find that your views have changed."

George shook his head sorrowfully. "I'm afraid that I have not been altogether free from error," he faltered.

"Darling!" cried Mrs. Early, who foresaw a

display of feeling, and was apprehensive of trouble.

"No," said her husband, gravely, raising his right hand; "I have not. In the light of certain events—by the wisdom of a certain person no longer with us, I see it. I have been wrong. I admit it."

"You have not been wrong, darling!" cried Mrs. Early, impulsively.

"Ellen," said Aunt Phœbe, in remonstrance, "I'm surprised at you. I admire the spirit that prompts your husband to make these confessions. Please do not interrupt."

"I have told lies," said George, penitently.

Mrs. Early frowned and sighed.

"I have drunk whisky, and acquired habits that made my presence obnoxious to the fair creatures, both youthful and aged—I mean experienced—with whom good fortune placed me."

Aunt Phœbe coughed.

"There are many things," said George, looking at the ceiling, "that I would not have done had I known all I know now." Observing that Aunt Phœbe's eyes were on the tablecloth, he winked at the fireplace. "But I hope that it is not too late to make amends."

"There is still time," said his aunt, fervently, "to repent and lead a better life."

"It is that which makes me glad," said George.

Having generously paid the ten-pound subscription and left behind him an impression of wholesome righteousness, Mr. Early stepped into a hansom cab and drove to Upper Thames Street.

Here his calm demeanour and amiability, contrasted with the feverishness of the last few days, caused a general raising of eyebrows. To the head clerk, who humbly apologized for his stupidity, George was gentleness itself. Instead of rating him he sympathized; so that Parrott, who imagined that he had at last got a fair inkling of George Early's character, went away more mystified than ever.

The other ex-legatees received the news with surprise and some apprehension. Doubtless they had stored away in their minds various plans for enriching themselves at their master's expense, intending to profit by their own experience. Gray certainly had, and the rumours did not prevent his putting one into execution very promptly. He appeared in the chief's office an hour after that gentleman arrived.

He received a cheerful welcome, to which he responded.

"I suppose you know my errand," he said, smiling maliciously, and rubbing his hands together.

His master looked up, thought a moment, and regretted that he could not call to mind anything important concerning himself and Gray. But whatever it was, he promised that it should receive his attention.

"It's a question of money," said Gray. "A little loan of five pounds to begin with. I suppose I need not use any arguments in favour of my case; you already understand the business well."

"Dear me!" said George; "I hope no misfortune has befallen you, Gray, that you need this money. You did quite right to come to me. You shall certainly have it."

"Thanks," said Gray.

"I always prefer to have my men come straight to me. Some people may think me hard, but I tell you, Gray, I can't bear to feel that any of my employes are uncomfortable or in want."

"Glad to hear it."

"Yes, Gray, you shall certainly have the loan. It is not convenient to give it you at once, but you shall have it."

"Oh," said Gray, rubbing his chin; "I'd prefer to have it now."

"That's very unfortunate," said George; "I hate to inconvenience anybody. It quite grieves me."

"I dare say it does," Gray said sarcastically. "Perhaps you can tell me when I'll get it."

"That I can," replied his master, cheerfully; "the moment I have the money here for you I'll ring the bell and give it you."

Gray drew himself up and folded his arms. "I take that to be a refusal," he said bluntly. "And I must point out to you the consequences to yourself if I mention it in the right quarter. Now, what's it to be?"

"It's to be five pounds when I ring the bell."

"And suppose I refuse to wait your pleasure?—as I don't see why I should."

"You must do it or go without," replied his master. "I may as well mention, Gray, that I have decided to get rid of those men whom I find to have bad habits. Recognizing myself the principles of truth and temperance, I could not keep men with so little respect for themselves and the good name of a firm like this as to be addicted to the vices."

"I don't see how that will help you," Gray pointed out. "If I am not receiving wages here, I shall be more in need of money than ever, and I should have to make my demands greater. So by sacking me you won't be doing yourself any good."

George waved his hand. "The interview is now closed," he said.

Gray departed, but reminded his chief that

he should expect to hear the bell ring before the day was out.

No other incident occurred, and George Early began to persuade himself that his new plans would act admirably. His ingenious handling of Gray must have acted as a damper on the others. Elated with this success, his behaviour at home that evening was even more commendable than in the morning, and he fell to eulogizing Old Fairbrother with an emphasis that seemed a little unwarranted, even to Aunt Phoebe.

Gray made another application the next morning for his loan, and repeated it before midday, each time being quietly but firmly put off by his master.

"All I hope is," said Gray, on the last occasion, "that you won't force me to do anything unpleasant. I'm not sure that this delay doesn't amount to a refusal. Perhaps I ought to consult the solicitors."

But he didn't do so, and George Early began to make his way about the iron warehouse with more confidence than he had done since the legacies first began to threaten him.

As he stepped out of the showrooms into the warehouse that afternoon, a man who had been hovering mysteriously about a gas stove turned towards him.

"Anybody about?" he said, inquiringly.

"What can I do for you?" asked George, in his best salesman style.

"Want a gas stove," said the man. "I've heard a lot about your 'Little Wonder,' and I'd like to have one, if it's up to the mark."

"That's the very stove," said George, pointing to the one the man had been handling.

"So I see, and if all you say of it is true, that's just the stove for me. But is it?"

"Is what?"

"Is that true?" said the man, holding up a Fairbrother pamphlet, in which the merits of the particular stove were described in glowing terms.

George suddenly realized that he was in a difficult situation, but, with the Fairbrother legacy fresh upon him, he stuck to his principles.

"All lies," he said.

"What?" cried the man; "it won't cook a chicken and a joint of beef, two vegetables and a pudding, and air the clothes at the same time, all at the cost of a farthing?"

"No," said George.

"All bunkum, eh?"

"Not a word of truth in it."

"I'm glad you told me that," said the man. "I like people to be straightforward. Perhaps the 'Little Midget' that's made by Oldboys up the street, is a better stove, eh?"

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"Much better," said the unfortunate salesman.

"Well, now," said the man, "I wanted a few other things, but I'm not sure about dealing here, after what you've said. See that set of broken stove bars; how soon would you promise to get me a new set like it?"

"In four days," said George.

"Four days, eh? And when should I get 'em if I ordered them to-day?"

"In about two weeks."

"Oh, that's the sort of promise you make, is it? Can't be trusted?"

"Never," said George.

Then the man, who seemed to have suddenly developed an insatiable curiosity, led George Early into discussing all sorts of affairs concerning the firm, and obtained from him the most startling admissions.

He was an insinuating little man, and he resisted every effort that his victim made to end the conversation, until the head of Fairbrothers found himself uttering the most alarming truths, and being led like a monkey on a string.

Eventually the man left, and George Early found himself sitting on a portable copper by one of the warehouse doors overlooking the river, gazing blankly at the rising mists. Gradually he came back to a realization of affairs, and began

to discover that he had made a fool of himself. With the same discovery came the sounds of cautious footsteps; a voice that he recognized as belonging to Gray said, "It's all right," and asked, "Where's Polly?"

The head of the firm left his position on the copper, and stood in the shadow of one of the iron fireproof doors. Any conspiracy taking place in the building was his affair without doubt.

Another person having joined the conspirators, George listened with interest.

"Any luck?" asked Busby.

"None," answered Gray. "He's put me off so far, and I thought it best to let it go at that for the present. I don't know how to force his hand. We must come to some decision about what we are going to do while there's the chance."

"Not so loud," cautioned Busby, lowering his voice; "you don't know who may be about."

"There's nobody up here," said Gray, irritably, but the two lowered their voices, so that George Early could only catch a word here and there.

The caution was relaxed after a while, when Gray said—

"Then that's fixed up. I'll tackle him tomorrow, and let him see that we mean business. Won't little Georgie swear! We'll have a hundred each down to begin with; no paltry fivers."

George shivered.

"Two hundred," said Parrott, greedily.

"One'll do to start," said Gray. "That'll be only a mite to what we'll get later."

"Will he pay up, d'you think?" asked Busby.

"Pay?" said Gray. "He can't help it. Look what he's got to lose if he don't pay; he's had his turn, and now we'll have ours."

Judging by Gray's tone, George felt convinced that he meant all he said. He was not sure now that he had been quite wise in having laughed so much at Gray's expense.

"Suppose he dodges us, and doesn't turn up at the office?"

Gray laughed. "We'll go to his house," he said; "that'll be tit for tat. We'll get a bit of our own back."

George listened to the retreating footsteps, and a fierce indignation sprang up within him. So violent was it that he daren't come out from the shadow of the iron door until it had abated somewhat. Then he cautiously made his way back to his own room, put on his hat, and went home.

CHAPTER XIX—*A Shot that missed Fire*

THE conspirators turned up at the office in a hopeful spirit next morning. Early as the hour was, Gray had evidently been assisting his courage with some beverage that cheers and yet inebriates.

"Who's going up first?" he asked in a confidential whisper. "I'd sooner steady my nerves a bit; I'm better in the afternoon."

"Let Polly go, then," said Busby. "I'm a bit shaky myself in the mornings; must be the train journey."

Parrott, when consulted, did not seem to relish the idea much, and suggested that they should go together. Union would be strength.

"Perhaps it would be better," agreed Busby.

"Anyhow," said the head clerk, "there's all the day yet. We don't want to rush it. Let us give him time to get here and settle down to work."

This was agreed upon, and the matter was left until the morning's work was well under way, when it was taken in hand again.

"Now," said Gray, "this is the best time to begin. He'll be in the middle of the correspondence, and there's no fear of interruption."

At that moment Master Cacklin slapped a bundle of letters down on Busby's desk, and set Gray's nerves all on edge again.

"Pardon, sir," he said impudently, "hope I didn't disturb you. S'pose you've heard the new rule, gents."

"You cut along," said Busby.

"Grand idea," said Cacklin; "every one's got to come up chaperoned by his grandmother. If he ain't got a grandmother he gets the lady lodger instead. What do you think of it, eh?"

"Now, clear out," said Gray, threateningly.

"Excepting the guvnor," added Cacklin; "and he brings his aunt. Darling little bit o' sugar-stuff she is, too, I give yer my word."

And the genial youth affected to put his lower jaw into a position from which it would not return to the normal.

"What's all that rot?" asked Gray, who scented some truth in the nonsense.

Mr. Cacklin obligingly informed his hearers that their respected chief had been accompanied to the office that morning by his aunt, who was now settled in the biggest armchair upstairs with her hat and jacket off, as if she meant to stay.

Gray and Busby exchanged glances.

"That settles it, for the present," said Busby, as Cacklin disappeared; "we can't go while she's there."

"She'll be off after lunch," said Gray. "On the whole I think it's better to tackle him after lunch."

But Aunt Phoebe did not go after lunch; she returned to the office with her nephew, and never left it till the two of them departed together at the close of business.

"It was bad luck," said Gray; "but we'll get him to-morrow safe enough."

On the morrow, however, fortune was equally unkind to the blackmailers, for this time Mrs. Early herself accompanied her husband to the office, and settled comfortably in the big arm-chair, as her aunt had done on the previous day. At lunch they went out together and returned together.

"We must bide our time," Gray said comfortingly to his co-conspirators. "We'll have him right enough presently."

When, however, the morrow brought Aunt Phoebe again, and lunch-time saw her return with George Early, Gray could scarcely contain himself for rage.

"It's a plant," he said fiercely; "a put-up job. He's doing it on purpose, so as we shan't get him alone."

And there seemed to be some truth in what he said, for whenever George Early left his office to enter the showrooms, or tour the warehouse,

his aunt always accompanied him. Together they interviewed customers, inspected the barges at the wharf, pulled stoves about, and went over the numerous incidents of an ironmonger's day.

Once Gray plucked up courage, and boldly entered the upstairs office. Aunt Phoebe was seated at George's desk writing, while George himself lolled in an armchair, reading a paper.

The lady looked up inquiringly as Gray advanced.

"It's a little matter I'd like to see Mr. Early about," he said, with a cough.

"I think you may tell me," said the lady. "I understand most of Mr. Early's business."

"You can tell my aunt, Gray," called out George, from behind the paper.

"If I could see Mr. Early alone——"

"Mr. Early has no secrets from his family," said Aunt Phoebe, at which George coughed and Gray frowned.

After two or three futile attempts to attain his object, Gray was forced to retire with the feeble excuse of having forgotten something.

Aunt Phoebe looked meaningly at George, who nodded.

The chaperon game continued, and the three men were reduced to such straits as tracking the cab home to Kensington, and taking turns to keep watch on the house, all without avail.

Perhaps not entirely without avail, for towards the end of a fortnight George Early's bright looks gave way to a peevishness he could ill conceal. Aunt Phoebe's temper was affected too, and frequent bickerings were reported by those who came in their way. Whenever Master Cacklin happened to be the person, he gave to those below stairs a description that was most graphic and inspiring.

"She's wearing him out," said Busby, who clutched at these fragments in an endeavour to cheer his fellow.

Gray shook his head. "No fear of that," he said; "he's one of those men that would keep it up just for the pleasure of annoying us. I know him."

George Early did keep it up, and succeeded in completely outwitting his trackers, until Gray, tired of waiting for his revenge and a sight of the firm's money, called a council to discuss some change of plans.

Neither Busby nor Parrott had any suggestion to make, so Gray unfolded his own idea. Not a bad plan either, the others agreed. Gray proposed that the three should make a bargain with the lawyers, by which they were to receive a certain fixed sum, say five hundred pounds, for information of George Early's lapses from grace. Having got this promise, they could, if they felt disposed, hold

it threateningly over the chief's head, and demand a higher sum to keep silence. Of course the lawyers, not having the detective facilities of the three, would gladly accept their services; of this they felt assured.

It was arranged that Gray should take the next morning off with a bad cold, and pay a visit to Dibbs and Dubbs, to arrange matters.

This new scheme so occupied the thoughts of the precious trio that they missed the news of a breezy outburst between George and his beloved aunt, resulting in the lady bouncing off and leaving her nephew to himself.

All unconscious of this missed opportunity, Gray made his way the next morning to St. Paul's Passage, passed the resplendent brass plate of the lawyers' office, and climbed the dark staircase. The new head of the firm, who had now sufficient confidence to print his own name of Dawkins as successor to the departed, received the informer with some interest, which, being a lawyer, he was not foolish enough to disclose.

"You know my name, I dare say," said Gray, with a cough.

The lawyer coughed in sympathy, and warmed his hands by the fire.

"I remember it well, Mr. Gray. I'm afraid we were a little sharp on you some time ago, but all a matter of business, you know. Quite a

matter of business. If we can be as energetic on your behalf, we shall be delighted, my dear sir; delighted, I assure you."

He coughed again, sat down, and looked inquiringly at Gray.

"Of course," said Gray, throwing one hand languidly over the back of his chair, "I hold a position of some importance at Fairbrothers, as you doubtless know."

Mr. Dawkins bowed.

"And I am constantly, I may say continually, with the head of the firm."

Mr. Dawkins bowed again.

"Now, it struck me," said Gray, leaning forward and gazing shrewdly at the young lawyer, "that I might be of some service to you over this legacy business. Of service to you and myself at the same time."

Mr. Dawkins raised his eyebrows, but said nothing.

"For reasons of my own," he went on, realizing for the first time that his proposal was a blackguardly one, "I am disposed to assist you towards the end for which you are working. In this, my two friends, who enjoyed the legacies at the same time as myself, are willing to help. The three of us, in fact, to cut the matter short, will work together. And I can assure you that we shall work in earnest."

At Gray's vehement tones the lawyer stuck a thumb in the armhole of his waistcoat, and laughed.

"Getting a bit of your own back, eh?"

Gray nodded. "We have exceptional opportunities," he added. "Opportunities which you, as a man of business, will understand are not open to the ordinary detective, nor for that matter to an extraordinary one. One or other of us can be always at his elbow."

"His very shadow, in fact," said the lawyer.

"Exactly," said Gray. "What is more," he added, with a look intended to convey a volume of sinister meaning, "we know his weaknesses."

The lawyer rose, and adopted a more negligent attitude against the mantelpiece.

"You offer yourselves to me as amateur detectives, in fact, Mr. Gray; and purpose informing me of any lapse on the part of Mr. Early respecting the matter concerned in the late Mr. Fairbrother's will?"

Gray leaned back, and bowed to indicate that Mr. Dawkins had summed up the matter perfectly.

"And for which," said Mr. Dawkins, "you naturally expect some recompense."

"That could be arranged," said Gray.

The lawyer toyed playfully with the seal on his watch-chain, and studied in turn his visitor's hat, coat, and boots.

"Mr. Early has risen considerably in the firm, I believe," he said presently.

"Yes," said Gray, shortly.

"But you still enjoy his confidence, of course?"

Gray nursed his knee with all the nonchalance he could comfortably affect.

"If anybody has the chance to drop upon an error of judgment on his part," he said, "I think I know who it is."

Mr. Dawkins smiled. "You have a good deal of confidence, Mr. Gray. Now, from what I have heard of Mr. George Early, he can, if he is so disposed, set himself a task, and dare some of the boldest to turn him from it. When a young man makes up his mind on temperance, and has a good deal at stake, I'm inclined to think he won't easily run risks."

Gray tapped the crown of his hat impatiently. "He may keep off whisky for a bit," said he, "but the others are not so easy. Where we come in promptly is on the borrowing score, and the little departures from truth. They'll be our first bull's-eyes, Mr. Dawkins."

The lawyer's eyes lit up suddenly. He left the mantel-shelf, and sat down.

"May I ask, Mr. Gray, if you saw Mr. George Early yesterday?"

"I think so," said Gray; "yes, of course, many times."

"But not this morning?"

"Not yet; why?"

"Then you do not know," said the lawyer, in slow, even tones, "that Mr. Early has already forfeited two of the three legacies. It is now only the temperance legacy that he holds."

This news almost bereft Gray of speech. He murmured something unintelligible, and sat staring at the lawyer with open mouth.

"Yes," went on Mr. Dawkins. "Mr. Early threw them over voluntarily, and already has our notices."

"Of course he does not need the money, and he is doubtless very sure that the temperance legacy is alone sufficient for his purpose. On the whole, I must admit, although I am working against him, that it is a devilishly smart move. I tell you candidly, Mr. Gray, that I think it an infernally smart move."

Gray roused himself slowly, and got up from the chair.

"As to the temperance business, Mr. Gray," said the lawyer, with a laugh, "I'm afraid that'll be a hard nut to crack, eh? For my part, I assure you, I think it pretty tough."

But Gray was not in the mood for further discussion. He drifted out of the office, and walked unsteadily down the stairs.

CHAPTER XX—*A Dark Man of Foreign Appearance*

MR. DAWKINS had guessed aright in supposing that George Early felt safe on the temperance question; his old confidence returned at once. He started to enjoy life in real earnest. When at business, he stuck fast to the firm's affairs, and when away, as was not infrequent now, he went everywhere and saw everything as people with health and money do.

Mrs. Early enjoyed herself immensely, and even Aunt Phoebe, who had once felt she could never forgive her nephew for his recklessness, began to assume a placid air, and agreed to prolong her visit to Brunswick Terrace.

Perhaps the alcohol restriction was a thorn in George Early's side; but if so, he grieved in secret, for in public you would never dream that he had a care.

The keen-eyed Mole and his watchful band doggedly followed their quarry, and used every artifice known to the modern detective to catch him napping; to all of which the legatee submitted patiently, and clung to the teetotal habit like a fanatic.

Having disposed of the truth-telling business,

and being desirous of paying off old scores to the last fraction, George would often take customers in hand himself, and, followed by Gray with a note-book, tax his imagination to the utmost over such prosaic things as cooking-ranges, gully-pipes, and girders. To all this fiction Gray would listen, conscious that much of the elaboration was at his expense.

At a time when the legacies were, so far as Gray and Co. were concerned, quite a thing of the past, a dark man of foreign appearance, with black hair and well-curled moustaches, made his appearance in the Fairbrother showrooms, and desired to see the principal. He was expensively dressed, and was accompanied by a friend, whose business it seemed to be to echo the abstract statements of the foreign man and agree with his conclusions.

George Early appeared, and learned that the foreign gentleman, whose name was Caroli, desired to choose many elaborate articles for an English mansion about to be built.

To so distinguished and wealthy a customer the pick of the Fairbrother goods were drawn forth, and ably eulogized by the chief himself.

"What can be said of a stove like that?" said Caroli, appealing to his friend, as a magnificent invention of burnished brass and copper scintillated before them.

"That is a stove to be considered," said Caroli's friend.

"It is magnificent!" said Caroli.

"Splendid!" said his friend.

"The pattern exactly," said George, solemnly, "as supplied to His Majesty. Chosen by the Queen herself from among fourteen hundred stoves."

They passed along in procession, followed by menials ready to drag forth hidden treasures, strip and lay bare their beauty to the eye of Caroli.

Cost was nothing to the wealthy foreigner. He wanted beauty, and looked at everything with an artist's eye. Doubtless an hereditary trait of his noble ancestors.

"Without beauty I could not live," cried Caroli.

"Beauty is the very heart of life," echoed his friend.

"Those leaves are not real, but the artist's soul is in them," cried Caroli.

"They are the perfection of art," said his friend.

The leaves, which happened to be on a wrought-iron gate, were, George informed his customers, designed from a pattern originally executed by the King's sister.

With exclamation and acclamation, volubility on Caroli's part, and parrot-like earnestness on

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that of his friend, ingenious fiction by George Early, patient scribbling by the order clerk, and continuous perspiring by the menials, the best part of two hours went by before George led his noble patron to the chief office.

There the principals sat and talked, while the paid hirelings drew up a clean account of the goods chosen and their cost.

Caroli glanced at it, and tossed it aside to continue an interesting account of something that happened to somebody at Monte Carlo, in which he had succeeded in getting the attention of George Early.

In his foreign way, Caroli gesticulated, and held George with his eyes through the most exciting part of the narrative. It was a long story, too, and if anybody else had been there, they would have noticed that George Early's glance had become a fixed stare, and that Caroli's gesticulations had developed mysteriously into the passes commonly used by music-hall mesmerists.

His speech had altered strangely, too, and had taken a more commanding tone. He told George that he (George) was Caroli's friend, that Caroli was his distinguished customer, and that they had spent a pleasant morning. He said also that to commemorate this auspicious occasion they would drink together.

Whereupon Caroli suddenly produced a flat bottle of spirits and a glass, drank himself, handed some to his friend, and then poured out a glassful for George.

What would happen? George was a teetotaller. Surely he would not do as this man suggested; and yet he appeared to offer no opposition. Did he realize what he was about to do—what serious issues were at stake?

To the amazement of Gray, who had silently entered the room, George Early lifted the glass at Caroli's command, and drank off the spirit.

* * * * *

The worst of this lapse on the part of George Early was that he knew nothing about it. He remembered some mesmeric influence, in which Caroli had been the agent, but knew nothing of the whisky until his customers had gone, when he recalled the taste and Gray described the scene.

In addition came the usual letter from the lawyers.

Who could be at the bottom of it? Mr. Dawkins strenuously and indignantly denied any complicity in the affair. Nobody else could be interested but the philanthropic institution to whom the property would go. But who dare accuse any of these pious gentlemen?

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Gray knew. He had had the shrewdness to follow the great Caroli, and he discovered that some of the pious gentlemen were not so pious as they seemed. Having got that far, he was able to make a bargain with Caroli in order to keep the facts to himself.

Of course the magnificent array of goods for the country mansion went back to their shelves. Caroli did not appear again.

Although his great desire was to meet the foreign gentleman once more and settle accounts with him, George Early chose the wiser course of putting himself under the chaperonage of his wife or her aunt, when away from home, in order to combat any further attacks.

And Aunt Phœbe performed her duty nobly. So nobly that George Early's enemies would have to wait until her vigil was relaxed. They did wait—and when the time came, made the most of it.

One afternoon Aunt Phœbe entered her niece's room in a great state of vexation. Something alarming had occurred. You could tell that by the way she flounced in, jerking her head sharply, and giving little emphatic thumps at nothing with her clenched hands. George, who followed her, sat in a dazed way on the first chair he came to.

Mrs. Early feared the worst, and her fears were realized.

"Bless you, I can't say how it happened," said Aunt Phœbe, her indignation almost depriving her of speech. "We were coming home in a hansom cab, and drove Oxford Street way as I had to make a call about some gloves. I wasn't away a quarter of an hour, I should think, but when I came back he was gone. Gone—wafted away."

"Gone?" echoed her niece.

"Missing," said Aunt Phœbe, with a wave of her hand. "I found him standing on the pavement a little later trying to recollect who he was. All he seems to know of it is that a mysterious man told him I had been taken ill, and was carried into a wine-shop. A wine-shop, of all places! Instead of me he found there the foreign person. What happened, goodness only knows, except that he's been drinking!"

Mrs. Early clasped her hands and gazed tearfully at her husband, who sat looking in a forlorn way at the carpet.

"What's to be done?" asked Mrs. Early, in a loud whisper.

"To be done?" said Aunt Phœbe. "That's what's worrying me. Another turn like this, and the two of you are beggars. Think of it—beggars!"

"It's a shame!" cried Mrs. Early, indignantly.

"It's a conspiracy," said her aunt, darkly.

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"And I shall make it my business to find the conspirators. If that sharpshooter of a lawyer isn't at the bottom of it, then somebody else is. One thing's certain, there must be no more office work for the present. And before the day is out we must decide what is to be done. The first thing I should advise is your getting rid of those three men. They've certainly had a hand in this business."

Towards evening George Early regained his normal condition, and expressed himself very forcibly about the way in which he had been treated.

"I'm afraid it won't do you any good to stand there using language," said Aunt Phoebe, shortly. "It would be more interesting to know what you propose doing."

George had nothing to propose at the moment, but promised to try to think of something. Having taken the edge off his resentment, he said that, as matters stood, there was only one thing to be done, and he meant to do it. So the trio sat far into the night discussing the new proposals.

CHAPTER XXI—*Follow my Leader*

THE detectives of Dibbs and Dubbs usually began their sentry-go at Brunswick Terrace as the clock struck eight. On the morning following George Early's second encounter with Caroli, Mole was at his post at six. Looking over the bedroom curtains at half past, George noted the fact and swore softly. He completed his toilet, and, picking up the shabby portmanteau he had packed the night before, made his way to the back door.

The sleek top hat and frock coat of business had disappeared, and George stood arrayed in the loudest of check suits, covered by a loose light coat; on his head was a cloth cap. In this array he made his way out of the back gate, traversed the passage sacred to the tradesmen who supplied Brunswick Terrace, and emerged in a mews, which led to a main thoroughfare at right angles to that where the patient Mole kept watch.

George peeped cautiously round the corner: the coast was clear. He hailed a disconsolate cabman, who had all but given up hope of a fare, and drove off to Victoria.

Arrived at the station, some strategy was

necessary to make sure that the detectives were really evaded. George narrowly watched the movements of the men who loitered about the platform, and made feints of leaving the station to see if any would follow him. Finding that nobody took any interest in his movements, he approached the booking clerk and ordered his ticket in a whisper. The train and George went off soon after seven without any further excitement than the frantic barking of a dog, that had been left behind.

It was perfectly obvious that George Early intended to checkmate his enemies by discreetly withdrawing from London for a time. In the seclusion of the country he would be able to formulate some plan of campaign by which both lawyers and blackmailers would find that they had met their match.

George got out at a small station forty miles or so down the line. The only other passenger to alight was a young woman with three paper parcels, who had evidently too many personal troubles to be concerned in watching the movements of any young man. Having inquired of the one porter the whereabouts of the Wheat-sheaf Inn, the fugitive chief of Fairbrothers' had the satisfaction of finding a three-mile walk before him.

The landlord of the Wheatsheaf was not

troubled much with visitors, although he advertised his house as the most popular in the country. George found himself to be the one and only guest.

"What is there to do about here?" he asked, when he had disposed of a substantial meal.

"Do?" said the landlord, evasively. "It depends on what you want to do."

"I'm not particular," said George. "I've come down for a bit of a change. Any fishing here?"

The landlord lifted one hand, and wagged his head.

"You've hit on the one thing we haven't got. Anything but fishing."

"Shooting?" said George.

"Not at this time o' the year. You won't get shooting anywheres just now."

Fishing and shooting were all that George could think of, and he was not an adept at either.

"If you'll take my advice," said the landlord, looking his visitor over critically, "you'll just go easy at first. You've been overdoing it, I can see, and you're fair run down. You don't want no shootin' nor fishin', but plenty of good grub and a drop of good beer. I've seen young fellers the same way before. You take my tip and go easy."

As there appeared to be nothing else to do,

George had to be content with this programme. He walked out for the rest of the morning, and for the greater part of the afternoon; the evening was spent in the bar-parlour, where the landlord's old cronies drank George's health and advised him to "take it easy."

Next morning the landlord handed over a telegram, which read—

"Have discharged all three—very indignant; take care of yourself; new men coming in to-day —ELLEN."

"Now my little beauties," said George, smiling, "we'll see how you like that. Perhaps your friend Caroli can mesmerize some one into giving you a new job."

Three days of inaction passed, and George had not seen fit to desert his country retreat. It was slow work walking, eating, and drinking, and the new master of Fairbrothers' was beginning to fall back on the philosophy of the ancients, that wealth and position invariably have their disadvantages.

This morning it was raining, and he stood at the inn door debating whether he should brave the elements or retire to the bar-parlour. The problem was solved for him swiftly in an unexpected fashion. A carrier's cart, much bespattered and glistening with wet, had turned a

bend in the road and was now approaching the inn at a jog-trot. As George looked at the man tucked up under the hood behind the old white horse, another face peering from between the parcels attracted his attention. A keen glance satisfied him that this belonged to no other person in the world than Mrs. Gray's husband.

He turned indoors and went upstairs swiftly and silently. There was nobody about, and George slipped into his bedroom, holding the door open that he might the better hear any conversation which ensued. He anticipated some lively proceedings.

"Early?" said the landlord. "Yes, the gentleman's out, I think."

"Indeed!" said the voice of Gray. "Perhaps you'll be so good as to make sure that he is out, if you please. It's very important that I should see him now."

"Perhaps I will," said the landlord, "and perhaps I won't." The fact that Gray had not ordered anything, but had only asked for a visitor in a peremptory voice, did not help to recommend him.

"You might give me a whisky," said Gray, in a milder tone, observing his mistake. "Do you think Mr. Early will be long before he comes back?"

The landlord didn't know, but called to the

stable-boy and told him to see if Mr. Early was in his bedroom.

"I'll go with him, if you don't mind," said Gray.

George seized his hat as these remarks reached him, and looked about the room. There was no way out, so he promptly crawled under the bed.

Somebody knocked and entered. "Ain't here," said the voice.

"Are you sure this is his room?" said Gray, entering and looking about.

"This is the room all right," said the boy; "'e ain't 'ere." Some words ensued on the landing by Gray endeavouring to make a search of the house, from which he was finally persuaded by the landlady, a portly dame of fifteen stone.

As the departing footsteps reached the bottom of the stairs, George came forth with a smile.

"Find him?" said the landlord downstairs to the boy.

"Ain't there," said the boy.

"Now I come to think of it," said the landlord, who had taken a dislike to Gray, "he went down to the post-office just before you came. You'll catch him up if you hurry; it's only a couple of miles."

Gray prepared to depart. "If I should miss

him," he said, "you can say the gentleman who called came from—from Mrs. Early."

The landlord grunted, and Gray went off, having first satisfied himself that the man he wanted was not lurking about outside.

From his bedroom window George watched until Gray was nearly out of sight, and at once prepared to take advantage of so favourable an opportunity for slipping off. To go down the stairs would mean creating suspicion; he raised the window and looked out; nobody was about. He promptly climbed into the sill, dropped into the yard below, and walked round to the front.

"Hallo!" said the landlord, "there's been a man here for you. Come from Mrs. Early, he said."

"Ah!" said George, surprised; "where is he? I must see him at once."

"I told him you went to the post-office," said the landlord; "he was a rough-looking customer, and very disrespectful. I thought he'd come begging, perhaps."

"He's a scoundrel," said George, indignantly; "I expect the lazy brute won't come back. I must go after him at once; how long has he been gone?"

"Quarter of an hour," said the landlord; "I hope I didn't do wrong in——"

"That's all right," said George; "who's trap is that outside?"

"That's my trap, sir," said the landlord. "If you'd like to——"

"I'll borrow it," said George, "and go after him." He ran out, and jumped into the trap. In another minute he was driving off full speed to the station.

"Here, hi!" yelled the landlord, rushing out. "He's going the wrong way. That ain't the way to the post-office. Hi! Jim, run after him—quick! Tell him——"

George heard the shouts, but drove straight ahead. He did the three miles in twenty minutes, and reached the station just as a train steamed out. It was a down train, but George would have boarded it promptly if he could have done so; any escape was better than none. He stood on the platform cursing his luck, when a familiar voice fell on his ear. He darted into the waiting-room, and peered through the window. What he saw did not add anything to the joy of his position, rather the reverse. Two men were wrangling with a porter; one was Parrott, the other Busby.

"I'm done now," thought George; "they've got me fairly. They're going to hold me up while that foreign hound gets on to me again."

He looked round the waiting-room, but it

offered no escape. There was only one thing to do—to go off in the trap again ; and George was about to do it, when a London train rushed into the platform. He hesitated ; if he could get across the line, he'd be safe. He waited feverishly for a few minutes, hoping that Busby and Parrott would move, but they did not. The guard's whistle blew.

"Here goes," said George. He picked up a water-bottle, and hurled it at the outside window. A terrific crash followed, and the landlord's pony started off with a mad gallop. Parrott and Busby rushed through the waiting-room into the street. As they did so, George darted across the platform, and jumped down on to the rails. The train was moving away from the opposite side. Grasping a hand-rest, he climbed the nearest carriage, and opened the door.

"Hi! Stand away!" yelled a porter.

"It's Early!" screamed a voice, which George recognized as Busby's.

Safe inside, with the train gathering speed, he leaned out of the window, and waved his cap.

The two men were dancing frantically on the platform.

"Stop him!" roared Parrott ; stop the train !"

But it was too late to follow this advice,

and as the train rushed off George beheld his old colleagues gesticulating wildly around a solitary, powerless porter.

The journey started, the young man's thoughts were soon fully occupied. It was evident that the three men were fairly on his track, and had no intention of giving up the chase. If once they caught him they would keep him, and bring Caroli along to settle the third legacy. He could see through it all quite plainly. And, so far, he had not succeeded in finding a plan to properly check them.

George lit a cigarette, and settled himself moodily in the corner as the train pulled up at a station.

Presently the door of his compartment opened, and the guard appeared, accompanied by a porter and the station-master.

"That's the chap," said the guard, pointing at George.

The solitary passenger glared at him in dignified silence.

"Now then, m'lad," said the station-master; "you'll have to get out here."

"I'm going to Victoria, my man," said George, quietly.

"I've got orders to detain you; suspicious character," said the station-master, authoritatively. "You're sure this is the one?"—to the guard.

"That's him," said the guard.

"Look here," said George, darkly, as the station-master got into the carriage; "you'd better be careful what you're doing; I don't want any of you men to get into trouble, so I give you warning."

"He got in at Coddem?" said the station-master, turning to the guard.

"Coddem," said the guard.

"Now, come along," said the station-master, impatiently.

George sat up, and looked him severely in the eye.

"Where's your authority for detaining me?" he asked. "There'll be a row and heavy damages over this."

"It's all right," said the station-master; "I had a wire from Coddem to detain you—suspicious character."

"You've got the wrong man," said George. "Guard, start the train."

The station-master made up his mind quickly, and caught George by the arm.

"Give us a hand here, Joe," he said to the porter.

"Enough." George rose with dignity. "I'll go with you. It'll mean the sack for you all, this affair. Please don't say I didn't warn you."

"Don't you worry about us," said the station-master. "Right away, there!"

"Stop a bit," said the prisoner, pulling out a note-book; "I'll take your number please, Mr. Guard."

The guard smiled pleasantly, and displayed his number, gratuitously offering his name and address, and the age of his grandfather.

"If they should ask you," he said cheerfully, as he swung off in the moving train, "you can say I've been vaccinated."

With much elaboration George entered all particulars in his book, including the porter's number and description, a note of the station-master's whiskers, the time, and other odd things that gave weight to the occasion.

"If you'll promise not to attempt to escape," said the station-master, "you can wait in the booking-office until they come for you."

"No, thank you," said George, stiffly; "this is a criminal affair, and you must take the full consequences of it. It's just as well for you, perhaps, that you do not realize how serious it is."

"My orders are to detain you," said the man, stolidly.

"Where to?" asked the porter, as they halted by the booking-office.

"In the cloak-room," said the station-master. "I've got the guard's word that he's the man."

"There's no getting out of it," said George, as he was thrust into a small room cumbered with dusty trunks and parcels. "I warned you twice!"

With the confidence of official rectitude the station-master gave the door a slam and boldly turned the key.

"Suspicious character that," George heard him say to a passenger.

"Ay," said the other, "looked a smart young chap."

"A dangerous man in my opinion," said the station-master, "but he won't be here long; there's some people coming by the next train to identify him."

"Oh," thought George, "are there? So they've done me, after all." He gave vent to his feelings in a few choice expletives, and listened with dull curiosity to the retreating footsteps of his captors. He looked about him at the odd trunks and parcels, and finally noted that his hurried exit from the Wheatsheaf Inn had not improved his general appearance.

"No brushes here, of course," said George, looking round. "What's this?" He picked up a parcel in two straps with a handle. It proved to be a light dust coat. George used it to rub the mud splashes off his clothes and improve the appearance of his boots. He climbed up and

looked through the narrow fanlight. There was not a living soul to be seen.

"I suppose I'm in this infernal place for a couple of hours," he grumbled. "What's that?" He listened; signs of life were evident in a basket by the window. George gave it a sharp tap. A short bark greeted him. "A dog!" He read the label, "Snooks, to be left till called for."

"Sorry for Snooks," said George, pulling out his pocket-knife, "but I must have amusement." He cut the cord, and a small fox terrier bounded out and nearly went into a state of drivelling idiocy in his efforts to show gratitude for release.

"Good boy!" said George, fondling the dog. "Wonder if there's any more here?" He overhauled the parcels. "Hallo!" A faint mew arose from another basket. "This is a feline member; name of Wilkins." He cut the strap and released a black kitten. "Good!" said George, "that's a sign of luck." The cat jumped to the floor, and in two seconds a furious and terrific combat ensued, followed by a wild chase. Over trunks, baskets, bags and parcels went Wilkins' cat, followed madly by Snooks' dog. There was a momentary parley on a hat-box, and the chase continued afresh, ending as suddenly as it began by Wilkins' cat disappearing through the fanlight.

In spite of this disappointment Snooks' dog

wagged his tail and looked up gratefully at George for the brief excitement.

"This is going to be a beanfeast, I can see," smiled the captive. "If I can't get out of this place I'll make some trouble for that officious old fool. Suspicious character, he said I was! What's this?—more old clothes?" He pulled a plaid overcoat from under a pile of parcels and examined it. In one of the pockets he found a flask of whisky which he tasted, and promptly abandoned. From that he made a searching investigation of the room, overhauling other people's property without respect to name or rank, and displaying an inquisitive curiosity in the contents of small handbags. A square tin box puzzled him completely. He tapped it, and peered into the small holes on the top.

"There's some mystery here," thought George. "Perhaps it's an infernal machine, put here by one of the station-master's enemies. A man like that is sure to have enemies. I'll open it."

This was easier said than done, but the most obstinate of boxes like the most intricate of locks must give way before the perseverance of man. George exerted all his strength in a supreme effort and pulled. He was successful; the lid flew off with unexpected suddenness, and the contents came out in a shower.

George put down the box and laughed.

"Well," he said, "who'd have thought of finding frogs in a cloak-room. Go it, Snooks!"

Snooks' dog needed no urging, but jumped and twirled and barked with astounding rapidity. The frogs with equal mobility spread themselves over the room, and afforded the prisoner amusement for a good quarter of an hour. A small battalion of them found refuge in a large hamper filled with farm produce. George watched this attempt at ambush with great interest.

So far the prisoner's confinement had met with no interruption from without. Stealthy footsteps approached the door once, but on this occasion he contrived to push a handbag through the fanlight and had the satisfaction of knowing that Joe, the porter, received it on his head. A few rude counter-attacks from Joe were the last sign of life from the platform.

George had not entirely given up hopes of escape, and the sound of footsteps on the platform warning him that the next train was nearly due, he began to take note of his position. If he stayed quietly where he was the pursuers would come up with him, and never leave him until they had accomplished their purpose, which, of course, was obvious. They could easily smooth over the station-master with a five-pound note.

There was no way of escape but by smashing open the door, an almost impossible task; the

window was barred, and the ceiling looked too strong for escape by way of the roof. One thing only offered a way out and that was the fire-place, which George examined with interest. It was a fire-place with a very large grate, and an immense fire-guard of closely plaited wire surrounding it. George surveyed it quietly for a few moments, then collected an armful of brown paper and stuffed it in the grate. Having seen that the trap was firmly pulled down to prevent any smoke ascending the chimney, he sat down to await the arrival of the train.

He had not long to wait ; in a few minutes he heard the signal bell go, and immediately afterwards the clanging of a hand-bell and the stentorian voice of a porter announcing the London train.

George struck a match quickly, applied it to the paper in the grate, closed the fire-guard to prevent any danger, and crouched down by the door. In less than half a minute a volume of rich smoke ascended to the ceiling and began to pour through the fanlight.

CHAPTER XXII—*Blind Man's Bluff*

THE station-master had just appeared on the platform in readiness for the train when the half-dozen waiting passengers began to dance wildly and run to and fro.

"Hi! Fire!" yelled a man in corduroys.
"Station's afire!"

"Where?" cried the station-master. "What the——"

"It's the cloak-room!" yelled Joe, the porter.
"That chap——"

"Get the key—quick!"

"Fire!" yelled the man in corduroys.

"Fire!" roared a ploughboy and a man with a gun.

The station-master ran up to the door, thumped at it, and shouted, while the porter, who had doubled along the platform and back again, cried, "Open the door!"

"Where's the key?" roared the station-master. "Gimme the key!"

"Get the key!" yelled the man in corduroys.

"Key, key! Fire!" shouted the ploughboy and the man with the gun.

"You've got it!" cried the porter. "You didn't gimme——"

"I gave it you!" shouted the station-master, dancing and waving his arms.

"You didn't!"

"Water!" yelled the man in corduroys.

"Water, water!" shouted the ploughboy and the man with the gun.

A blue haze of smoke hovered over the platform as the London train ran in, and in two minutes the driver and stoker, guards, and a score of passengers joined the excited crowd. From every carriage heads appeared, and a medley of voices said—

"It's a fire!"

"I've got it!" said the voice of the station-master, huskily, as he rushed forward in his shirt-sleeves and fumbled at the lock of the cloak-room.

"Stand back there!" cried the man in corduroys, as Joe ran up slopping two pails of water over the feet of the passengers, followed by the ploughboy and the man without his gun slopping two more each.

"Stand back!" yelled a dozen voices.

The lock turned, the doors flew open and out came a cloud of smoke. With it came George Early, just in time to miss a deluge. Two lady passengers got their feet wet and shrieked, and no fewer than six men swore volubly in the approved custom of their own locality.

George, being about the only one inclined to leave the fire to take care of itself, immediately, under cover of the smoke, made for the station exit.

His object was to get safely out of sight and leave no clue to his whereabouts.

The station stood in an isolated position a good two miles from the nearest village, and George Early's only avenue of escape was a narrow road bordered by high hedges. He looked round quickly, just as a youth, attracted by the commotion, left his bicycle and hurried on to the platform. Without hesitation the fugitive borrowed the machine, and went off down the road at top speed. Halfway he turned to see how matters were progressing in the rear, and descried three figures following at a rapid pace on foot. George didn't need to look twice to see who they were.

At the first bend of the road he swung the bicycle over a hedge and abandoned it. Turning off at a right angle he ran along under cover of another hedge bordering a meadow, and was just about to congratulate himself on having eluded his pursuers, when a shout of discovery went up.

Off went George again, over a smooth green towards a clump of trees. Loud cries now sounded in the rear, and the fugitive, turning to discover the cause of them, saw the three men

wildly gesticulating. He hesitated a moment, but as they still followed he started off again. The cause of the row was now apparent: his pursuers were signalling to some men in the fields ahead of him to bar his passage. It was evident that they meant to do so from the way they began to form a ring.

"I'm surrounded," thought George, slowing down. He looked about him for a last chance, and swore at his slender opportunities. Nothing presented itself but a tall old oak.

To be surrounded and taken like a runaway convict was too galling; George made for the tree and prepared to climb. His breath was nearly done, but he easily reached the lower branches, and by the time a ring of twenty men had reached the vicinity, was able to pull himself nearly to the top.

"What's he done?" asked a farm labourer, as Gray and his colleagues in a profuse state of perspiration joined the group.

"We're after him," said Busby.

"You needn't tell us that, mate," said another man. "What do yer want him for?"

"Set fire to the railway station," said Gray.

"Liar!" came a voice from the clouds.

"Go up after him," said Parrott, pushing Busby forward.

"Let Jimmy go," said Busby.

"Keep 'em off," said George. "They're after my money!"

Gray came forward promptly and said, "A sovereign for the first man who fetches him down!"

"Two pound each to the men who hold 'em while I get away," yelled George.

A faint cheer from the labourers. "Look here," cried Gray; "he can't pay you! I'll give five pounds to the man who brings him down."

George boomed and dropped a branch on Gray's head. "I'm after them quids," said a strapping farm-hand, throwing off his coat and clambering up the tree.

"Pull him down!" cried George. "You'll all get in gaol for this if you're not careful."

Another man followed the first one, and a third followed the second.

"Five pound to the one who gets him," yelled Gray, encouragingly.

George tore off a branch and hit out at the first man as he came within reach. The man grew angry and grabbed at George's leg. Missing it, he clutched at the tree, and received a boot on his fingers. The howl that followed unnerved the third man, who descended in haste on to Parrott's shoulders.

George now climbed out to the end of a branch and worried the man that was overhauling him.

"You'll get six months for this," he said in a terrible voice.

"Come on," said the man, "you'd better give in. I've got you fair."

"Come a bit further," said George, now on the end of the branch.

The second man, who had been manœuvring by a different route, now appeared and made a grab at George's collar. The first man, fearful of losing his prize, did the same. George clutched at both, and the next moment, with a mighty crack, the branch gave way, and the three went tumbling down through the lower branches.

The first man picked himself up and rubbed his leg; the second man swore, gazed ruefully at a tear in his trousers, and sucked a bleeding thumb; George lay quite still.

The three men from Fairbrothers' ran forward.

"Here you are!" said one of the labourers. "Now, where's the five pound?"

"Hold on!" said the second man. "We brought him down together! That's half each!"

Gray looked down at the still form of his late master and turned white. George was lying just as he had fallen, with blood trickling from a scratch across the forehead.

"You've done something now!" said Gray. "You've killed him!"

"What!" said the first man in a whisper.

"He's done for!" said Gray, anxious to avoid paying now that affairs had taken a serious turn.

Number Two gave one look at George, then edged out of the crowd and bolted.

"It seems to me," said a man with black whiskers, "that it's you fellows who've done this chap to death, hunting him like a wild beast, and then trying to put the blame on to honest working men."

The crowd murmured approval at this speech, and Gray knelt down and tried to rouse Mrs. Early's husband.

"He's breathing!" he said. "Fetch some water!"

"Can't get no water here," said Black Whiskers. "Better take him down the village afore he pegs out."

"Take him down to the village," chimed in the others.

The ex-legatees, being in the minority, and not knowing what else to do, assisted in carrying George as directed. Three of the men accompanied them, the others returning to their work.

The procession moved slowly, and eventually came in sight of a red-brick house.

"That's the parson's," said one of the men. "We'll take him there; he's a bit of a doctor."

The parson received the insensible man

graciously, and heard the story of the accident. George was carried into the library and laid on a sofa, and after a brief examination the parson said he believed the case was not very serious, but that the patient must remain where he was for the present.

"You are staying in the village?" he said, looking somewhat unfavourably at Gray and his companions.

"We're not," said Gray. "But we shall stay now to hear how he gets on."

"Very well," said the clergyman. "I shall be pleased to give you information of his progress. Meanwhile, you need not consult a doctor. I think I can manage the case."

The vicar was one of those men with a smattering of medical knowledge, insufficient to enable him to cure anybody, but sufficient to give him a wild anxiety to want to. He shut the door softly on the three men and returned to the library.

"Strange!" he muttered. "I can find no symptoms of this man having had a heavy blow, and the state of unconsciousness is different from the ordinary."

"Perhaps it's shock, pa," said his daughter, who had ventured to take a look at George.

"True. Very likely. Perhaps you are right, my dear."

He felt George's pulse and examined the

scratch on his forehead, which was clearly but a trivial hurt.

"Perhaps you are right, my dear. But come along. I'll get you to go down to the town for me and get a prescription made up."

As they left the library George's right eyelid flickered slightly, as their footsteps echoed down the passage the lid began to open, and by the time all sound of them had ceased it was lifted to its fullest extent. The left eyelid followed the right one, and George Early lay with both eyes open. Then his head moved slowly, and his eyes having cautiously surveyed the room, his features broke into a broad smile.

Whether or not George's tongue would have begun to wag will never be known, for at that moment footsteps sounded outside the door, and the vicar entered. He found the patient as he had left him.

"He's coming to, I think; there seems to have been a slight movement," he murmured.

George's face twitched, and he uttered a faint—a very faint—groan.

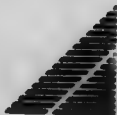
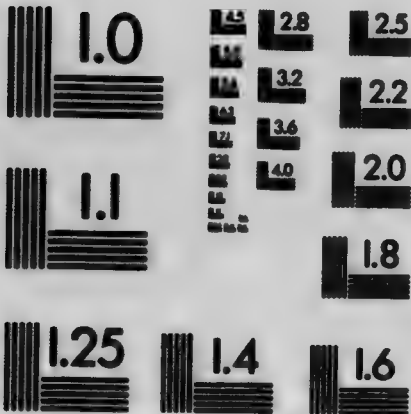
"Ah!" said the vicar, as if it was the pleasantest sound in the world, "I thought so—I thought so!"

By the time that the vicar's daughter returned George was fully conscious, but evidently still suffering from shock.



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"I won't use that now, my dear," said her father. "I think we can effect a cure by simpler methods. Do you feel any pain?" he said to George.

There was no response, and George appeared to be unconscious that any one was speaking.

"He doesn't hear you, pa," said the vicar's daughter.

"Do you feel any pain?" said the parson in a mild shout.

There was no response.

"His hearing's affected by the shock," said the vicar, wisely. "I've known such cases, though they are rare."

He motioned to George to attract his attention, and repeated the question. George looked in a scared sort of way, and put his hand to his ear. The vicar shouted loudly, then louder still.

George shook his head, and made a feeble motion for the question to be written down.

"It's as I thought," said the vicar to his daughter that evening. "The sudden shock has brought on complete deafness and a temporary paralysis of the faculties. He must stay here to-night, and we shall see how he has progressed to-morrow."

"Will his friends in the village take him away, papa?"

"I don't think so. He has intimated to me that they are undesirable men, and my private opinion is that they are up to no good. I've written to the address of a doctor friend of his, who will come down to-morrow, and with whom I shall be interested to discuss the peculiarities of the case. It is a most singular occurrence."

"Very, pa," said his daughter.

On the morrow George was in much the same state as previously, so far as hearing was concerned; his sight also appeared to be affected. The fall had not, however, in any way injured his appetite, for he managed to eat a hearty breakfast. The vicar nodded his head, and said that he had known such cases before; it was as he thought. To the inquiries of Gray and the others he sent word that the invalid was progressing favourably, but could not converse with visitors.

George's friend, the doctor, arrived about midday. He proved to be one John Cattermole, a Walworth chemist, to whom George, in his clerking days, had applied occasionally for relief in bodily ailments, and very frequently for assistance in pecuniary difficulties. In the hour of prosperity George had not forgotten Cattermole, and now, when the tide of fortune had turned against him, he knew that his call for help would be answered. The friendly chemist arrived hot

and dusty, in a frock coat and silk hat much the worse for wear.

"A clever man," thought the parson; "has the utter disregard of appearances common to genius."

He greeted him warmly.

"You will agree with me, I think, that it is a most remarkable occurrence," said the vicar, when they eventually visited George, who sat in the library staring at a bookcase.

"I do," said Cattermole, laconically.

The vicar continued to pour forth his opinions, and relate instances of cases he had known, during which harangue George managed to apprise his friend of the state of affairs by a most unmistakable wink. Being thus informed, Cattermole became more amiable, and begged a private interview with the patient for a special examination.

"I think he will agree with me, my dear," said the vicar to his daughter; "he is one of the most enlightened men I have ever met, and one of the few who seemed to attach any weight to my opinion."

"He didn't say much, pa."

"It is not what he said, my dear; it is the way he looked and listened. You don't understand clever men as I do."

A quarter of an hour elapsed, and Cattermole left the library.

"It is shock," he said quietly.

"As I thought," said the vicar.

"Exactly," said the other; "you have treated the case perfectly."

"My dear sir——"

"I mean it," said Cattermole, smiling. "Now I wonder if you could supply me with some bandages? And perhaps you have such a thing as a green shade for the eyes. Both hearing and sight are affected, but there is no danger in travelling. We shall return to town immediately."

"My dear sir, I have all you require. And you must allow me—I insist on ordering the carriage for you."

When George Early emerged from the parsonage to enter the carriage his head was enveloped in bandages, covered by a black silk neck-cloth. A green shade covered his eyes. The shock had evidently affected his limbs also, for he moved very slowly, supported on one side by the vicar, and on the other by Cattermole.

Both accompanied him to the station, and it was perhaps due to the grave nature of the report that morning that they performed the journey without interruption from the discharged trio. Those worthies, on hearing later that George had left, abused the parson shamefully, and pointed out to the station-master that such a

dunderhead as himself ought not to be allowed on any station down the line.

The sight of George and his bandages had stopped the station-master's tongue; and while he described the fire scare, and how it proved to be nothing, to the vicar, he kept the story of the prisoner's misdeeds in the cloak-room, and the heavy claim for damages he should prefer against him, to himself. Seeing how friendly the vicar was with the young man, it was not his business to injure himself by interfering. The company would claim in due course.

George and his doctor friend went off in a first-class carriage, accompanied by the hearty wishes of the vicar. That worthy man grasped George's inanimate hand, and shook it warmly, exchanged a few pregnant remarks with Cattermole, and waved a good-bye with his handkerchief. Even Joe and the station-master touched their hats as the train departed.

The conspirators allowed themselves to get well out of hearing, and then George pulled off the green shade and roared. Cattermole took it up, and roared too.

CHAPTER XXIII—*First Stop, Hastings*

"**N**OW the question is," said George, as the train rattled along, "what am I going to do when I get to London?"

"You'll have a nice restful time," said Cattermole.

"I'm not so sure of it," said George, whose respect for the energy and ingenuity of Gray and his companions was much greater now than it had been. "Those blood-suckers won't leave me till they've got what they're after. I'm a peaceable man, and I don't want to spend the rest of my days playing follow my leader about the country. I suppose we go to Brunswick Terrace; is that the scheme?"

"No, this is the scheme," said Cattermole; "we get out here. Put your bandage on."

"Sevenoaks," said George, taking a hurried glance through the window as they pulled up.

"We break the journey here," said Cattermole, "and put 'em off the scent. You'll have to keep on doing that until you've struck the wonderful idea that is going to leave you in possession of the money without risk."

"Then the sooner I strike it, the better."

Cattermole led his invalid friend into the waiting-room and ordered a porter to fetch a cab. Half a dozen passengers looked on sympathetically as the two men entered the vehicle and the cabman closed the door softly.

"You can't dodge those fellows so easily," said George, doubtfully, as the cab went off at a walking pace. "They'll find out we've come here and follow us."

"It's all right," said Cattermole. "I took tickets to London, and broke the journey here because you were too ill to go further. They won't find you."

After a slow drive up an interminably long hill the cab stopped before an inn of countrified appearance where the two men met with a cordial welcome.

"My friend is an invalid," Cattermole explained, "and we've come here because I'm told it's quiet."

The landlord informed him that it was the quietest spot in the neighbourhood. It was especially fortunate too that there were no other visitors.

"I shall have to leave you for a bit now," said Cattermole, when they had done justice to a good hot meal and were safely out of earshot in the long garden. "Shop'll be going to the dogs if I don't get back to-day."

"How long are you going for?" asked George, anxiously.

"Not long," said Cattermole; "back to-morrow night. In the mean time you can think the business over."

Before departing he called the waitress aside and gave her explicit directions about taking care of the invalid, emphasizing his remarks with a gift of five shillings.

George sat in the garden and thought the matter over till the dutiful waitress led him in to tea. Then he sat in the deserted smoking-room and thought it over again till he was led away to dinner, after which he thought it over till bedtime. Secure in his bedroom, with the blinds drawn, he lit a cigar and did the rest of his thinking with his eyes open.

"Three days of this," he said to his image in the glass, "would about do for me. It's the slowest game I ever took on. I'd sooner be fighting station-masters and climbing trees. We'll get out of this and try something else when Catty comes back."

The attention bestowed upon George by the waitress was quite pathetic. She waited on him at breakfast-time, cut up his bacon and eggs and sugared his coffee to her own taste. Each of these little services was accompanied by a cheerful flow of conversation such as people are wont

to indulge in for their own gratification when attending sick children and babies.

"Come along," she said cheerfully, when breakfast was over; "now we'll give you a nice seat by the drawing-room fire, because it's cold and damp outside. There now, isn't that nice and comfortable?" as George was settled in a big armchair with his feet on a stool. Receiving no reply, and expecting none, she poked the fire into a blaze, and then brought the cook to look at the visitor. That lady, being of a sentimental turn of mind, gazed sorrowfully at George's good-looking features, and whispered her sympathy to the waitress.

"You can speak out, Mrs. Baily," said the girl; "he can't hear a word."

"Bless my 'eart now," said the cook; "pore young feller! My nephew 'Arry was just the same. Reg'lar handsome, and deaf as a brazen image."

"He's blind, too," said the girl; "isn't it a shame?"

"Ah," sighed the cook; "p'raps,"—looking meaningly at the rosy features of the waitress—"p'raps it's as well for some people."

The waitress blushed, and told the cook she was a caution.

"Them chins," said the cook, significantly, taking stock of George's features, "are a sign of a flirt. Baily had that sort of chin."

"I like brown hair in a man," observed the waitress, sentimentally; "especially with blue eyes."

"I s'pose his are blue?" said the cook.

"How should I know?" said the girl, flushing.

"I adore blue eyes," the cook said curiously; "have a look."

"You romantic old thing!" cried the waitress, laughing and approaching George. To obtain a good view of his eyes it was necessary to kneel on the hearthrug and peer under the green shade. She did so, and the intelligent look that met her was most confusing.

"They're blue, ain't they?" said the cook.

"I—I can't see properly," replied the girl; "I think they're brown."

She took another peep and looked straight into George Early's eyes. As she did so George closed one eye in a manner that made the waitress amble to her feet with a red face.

"Are they brown?" asked the cook.

"I don't know," said the girl, hastily. "I must get on with my work: I'm all behind."

The cook went back to her kitchen very reluctantly, and the waitress busied herself in clearing the breakfast-table.

* * * * *

It was unfortunate for George Early that the

train conveying his enemies to London should stop for several minutes at Sevenoaks till an express had overtaken it and rushed on ahead. During that time, an interesting conversation between a porter and a local drayman drifted into the carriage where Gray and his companion sat.

"Young feller, he was," said the porter, "and his head all bandaged and a shade on his eyes. I arst 'im for 'is ticket, and the doctor, 'e says, 'Don't talk to 'im,' 'e says; 'e's deaf, and blind too,' 'e says."

Gray got up, and leaned out of the window.

"Funny thing is," continued the porter, "that when the cab went off, I 'eard the two of 'em talking. Now, if 'e was deaf, 'ow——"

The guard's whistle blew suddenly, and the engine hooted.

"Come on," said Gray, quickly, turning to the others; "get out here; we're on their track."

He jumped on to the platform.

"Look here——" began Busby.

"Make up y' mind there," yelled the station-master, getting out of temper.

Arrott and Busby scrambled out together and fell over a truck.

"Don't know where you want to go to, some of you, I should think," said the station-master.

He slammed the door, and commented volubly

on the indecision of people who caused the company's trains to be late, and then blamed it on to the officials.

"We must find the cabman," said Gray, when they got outside the station.

The cabman was easily found, and for a small consideration he was able to recall exactly where he went on the day previous. Armed with the fullest information, the three men made their way to the inn on the hill.

The waitress was just clearing away the breakfast things when they arrived. George heard the well-known voice of Gray, and started in his chair. A cold perspiration broke out over him, but he remained as the waitress had left him, resting in the armchair with his feet on a stool.

"The gentleman's here," said the girl, ushering the three men into George's presence; "but he can't hear a word you say he's stone deaf, and blind too," she added.

"What a pity!" said Gray, in an unfeeling voice.

"You'd better wait till his friend the doctor comes," said the girl. "He'll be back this evening."

"Perhaps he'll know me if I speak loudly," said Gray. He walked across the room, and belovew "George!" into the ear of his late master.

Beyond a slightly perceptible shiver, there was no indication that the man in the chair had heard.

"Take the shade off his eyes," said Busby.

"You musn't," protested the girl; "he——"

But Gray did so, and found George Early with his eyes closed. A shake made him open them, but, as they looked vacantly at the opposite wall, there was no sign of recognition in them.

"He can't see anything," said the waitress.

"Perhaps he don't want to," said Gray.

"It's a shame to say that," cried the girl, indignantly. "You—you ought to be sorry for him."

"So we are," said Gray; "we're all sorry for him. We're old friends of his, and we've come to see him. Tell the cook we're going to stay to lunch; we'll all have lunch with our old friend George."

"I can't allow you to be with him here," said the girl, "because he's left in my charge, and he must be kept quiet."

"Of course he must," said Gray; "the less you say to him the better he'll like it. We'll leave him alone now, but we shan't be far away."

This last was uttered in a tone that the girl considered unnecessarily loud. Having seen her charge left unmolested, she went off, and consulted the cook on the question of luncheon.

Gray and his friends had no intention of being outwitted this time, and they kept a watchful eye on the room where George sat, one of their number having first despatched a telegram to "Caroli, London."

With the prospect of lively proceedings before him, the master of Fairbrothers' kept to his arm-chair by the fire, swearing softly to himself as he vainly endeavoured to think out a way of escape. With good fortune, and the waitress's help, he might manage to keep even with his opponents until Cattermole came, but they would not lose sight of him afterwards, he was sure of that.

The luncheon hour passed without further trouble, but no new idea had presented itself. Experience had taught Gray and his colleagues to exercise the greatest vigilance with so slippery a customer as their old employer, and they were careful to do so.

George looked round the old-fashioned room in which he sat, and deplored the fact that it lacked those useful secret exits so convenient in old days to a man in a tight corner. Such an aid would have enabled him to vanish cleverly. There was not even a panel or a family picture to swing generously forward and disclose a yawning hole.

A fanlight of modern construction gaped in

one corner, but it was doubtful if a grown man could have squeezed himself through this. It looked into a small parlour, where the landlord's buxom wife sat and superintended the affairs of the household.

Despairing of escape in that direction, George settled himself down in gloomy meditation, evolving all kinds of schemes for outwitting his wily enemies, every one of which proved unworkable.

His train of thought was in due course interrupted by the sound of voices from the next room. Somebody was in conference with the landlady, and the few words that fell distinctly upon the ears of George Early drove any further cogitation for the moment clean out of his head. He gave his whole attention to the conversation. One of the speakers was Gray.

"The fact is," George heard that gentleman say, "he isn't quite right—a bit touched in the upper story. You know what I mean. We didn't want to mention it, but I thought it best to let you know the facts."

"Deary me, now," said the landlady in a hushed voice; "to think o' that. Well, I can sympathize, for, believe me, nobody knows better—and the gentleman that brought him didn't mention a word——"

"That man," interrupted Gray, "means no

good to him. I want to get him away before they come in contact again. If they meet to-night——”

“He won’t be here,” said the landlady. “He telegraphed to my good man, saying he couldn’t get down till to-morrow.”

“Damn!” said George, under his breath.

“As I was saying,” she proceeded; “if anybody knows what that trouble is—meaning his head being wrong—if anybody knows, it’s my own blessed self. A boy o’ mine was just the same, a twin o’ that young fellow there”—evidently indicating somebody in the same room.

“Dreadful affliction!” said Gray. “Sometimes, when I look at—at George, and think of it, it makes me that sorry for him I don’t know what to do.”

“Ah, I can well believe that! I was the same with little Ernest. He wouldn’t have nobody touch him but me. He knew his own mother. Sometimes I used to say as he wasn’t so mad after all.”

“Bad thing to have meddlers,” said Gray. “That’s why I want to get him away. You see, we’re—we’re his keepers, and we want to get him back quietly to—to the asylum. Already his mind has been set against us, and if he’s left much longer, we shan’t get control of him. Now,

if your husband could lend me a trap, we'd get off almost at once."

"I dare say that could be done."

"Much the best thing for everybody," said Gray, in pleased tones. "Much the best."

"Yes," said the landlady, going back to her light-headed son. "Many's the time he's sat in that very chair you're a-sitting in now, a-playin' with his little Billy-Gee—his little wooden horse—and a-sayin' 'Erny good boy,' all the time. Dear little feller; only seven, too. Such a one for names! Moggles, he used to call me. Deary me, to think of it!"

"Very sad," said Gray. "Very sad."

"Yes, indeed, and that's why I always feel for any one like that. I suppose it's memories."

"They're better off—better off where they are. I dare say it was a blow at the time, but as the years go along——"

"That's true," said the landlady, jumping up to give directions to a maid. "They say time softens the blow. And yet," she added, as Gray got up to go, "it's nice to really know. My little Erny was lost, and from that day to this we never knew if he lived or died. Not but what it's pretty certain he did die, for he wouldn't have lived without me. Well, I suppose I musn't worry you with my troubles. I'll speak to my husband about the trap."

George returned to his seat by the fire, and marvelled at the impudence of Gray in his new rôle of lunatic attendant.

"It would serve them right if I turned mad for a bit," he said spitefully, "and did a little damage all round. There's no accounting for what mad people will do."

He turned this idea over thoughtfully in his mind, wondering if it couldn't be put to account in some way.

His reflections were disturbed afresh by the sound of the landlady's voice. This time it came from the hotel hall. Somebody opened the door of George's room.

"Come in," said the voice of Gray. "He's perfectly harmless. It's a sad case. He thinks that his eyes are bad, and that he can't talk or hear."

"Deary me!" said the landlady; "and does it take three of you to look after him?"

Gray was about to reply, when George started to his feet, and began to tremble visibly.

"What is it?" asked the landlady, in a loud whisper.

"Don't be afraid; it's only one of his tricks."

But George had turned towards the landlady and was holding out his arms. It was as if a chord in his memory, long dormant, had suddenly been struck when he heard her voice.

"He won't hurt you," said Parrott and Busby in one chant.

Then George electrified the landlady. It was simply done. He stood there, turned towards her, and spoke.

"Moggles!" he said, in an awful voice.

The landlady gasped. A chord in her memory had been touched, too.

"Moggles!" said George again.

"Don't mind him," said Gray, "he goes off like that sometimes."

"That voice," said the landlady, now beginning to tremble again. "Can it be——"

"Moggles!"

"My boy!" The landlady cried out with a half-shriek. "It must be. Let me see him."

Gray saw through the trick at once, and laughed out loud.

"Don't you be deceived, ma'am," he said, tearing the shade away from George Early's eyes. "It's a game he's playing. Look at him; that's not your boy."

George blinked his eyes, and looked as foolish as he could.

"I don't know," said the landlady, excitedly. "He's about the right size."

"Erny good boy," said George, smiling vacantly.

The landlady shrieked again. "It is!" she cried, "it is! I'll fetch my husband."

In the interval, George Early had a rough time with the three men, being threatened and sworn at without mercy.

"It's my move," said George. "Don't you worry."

When the buxom landlady returned with an equally buxom spouse, George had wriggled away from his captors, and was crouching in a corner.

"Want Moggles," he said, in a whining voice.

"There!" cried the landlady, turning to her husband, who stood with open mouth, scratching his head. "Did you hear that?"

"It's his play," said Gray. "Come along,"—turning to the others. "We'd better see about getting him away."

"Erny good boy," said George.

"There!" cried the landlady again. "Now don't you think I'm right?"

The landlord nodded his head sagely.

"Blamed if I don't, too!"

"Come along," said Gray; "get his hat and coat. We must make a start."

"Stop a bit," said the landlady; "I believe that young man is my own long-lost son that I haven't seen since he was seven years old. Didn't you hear him call me 'Moggles'?"

Gray laughed again. "That's a trick," he said. "his name is George Early. You've made a mistake."

"Erny good boy," said George. "Three bad men take Erny away."

Urged by his wife, the landlord now promptly claimed George as his lost son, and said he should resist any attempt at removal. Gray and his colleagues carried on a wordy war, and offered all kinds of proof of their own avowals, while George sat and stroked the landlady's hand.

"I declare to you that his name is George Early," said Gray, vehemently.

"Want Billy-Gee," said George.

"That settles it," cried the innkeeper, suddenly. "There's no fraud about that. He's our boy right enough."

By the time that Caroli arrived George was safely settled in the landlord's best parlour, undergoing the ordeal of comparison with his twin-brother Albert, a sportive young man, full of strange oaths, and inclined to doubt the genuineness of his newly-found brother. George bore his ill nature with good humour, and played the lunatic quite successfully. If he could keep the protection of the landlord and his wife, he did not doubt that some avenue of escape would open before long. Fortunately, the obstreperous Albert was leaving early the next morning for a few

weeks, and George would have the field to himself.

The four conspirators had engaged rooms in the inn for the night, but George managed to put his newly-found parents on their guard against any efforts at kidnapping.

"He can sleep in the little room next to Albert, and leave the door open," said the fond mother. "And then Albert can lock the door when he goes off in the morning."

"Thanks," said Albert, sourly.

"He's harmless enough, bless his heart," said the old lady, smiling at George. "It does seem funny that his hair has changed colour."

"Keep your eye on the cash-box," said Albert, "or you'll find that change colour before the morning."

George lay in bed with a peaceful smile on his face when the ungracious Albert lumbered upstairs; and complacently bore the candle-light scrutiny which the other bestowed on him for the space of two seconds.

Long after the noises of the house had ceased he lay awake searching his brain for the scheme that was to place his enemies *hors de combat*. It was all very well to outwit them for a day or two, but something lasting was needed. He could not go on dodging about the country in the fashion of the last few days.

As the church clock struck one he got out of bed and peered through the window which looked out on the roadway. He had a suspicion that Caroli and his assistants were taking every precaution to prevent his giving them the slip. Patient observation for half an hour rewarded his effort, a man that he recognized as Busby came out of the shadow of a gateway opposite, leisurely crossed the road, and disappeared at the side of the inn. Presently he as leisurely returned to the gateway, and was lost in the gloom.

George got back into bed and pondered while the clock struck two, and afterwards three. Then he got out again and walked to where the landlady's son lay wrapped in slumber. By his bed stood a clock, on a table. The alarm was set for half-past three. His new brother made it fifteen minutes later. Then having gathered up the slumbering man's clothes he carried them into his own room, transferred the contents of the pockets to his own, and made an exchange of suits; emptying Albert's match-box with great care into the water-jug.

When he got back into his bed his own gaudy check clothes lay in Albert's room.

"He'll be off before it's light," said George, snuggling between the sheets. "It's a chance in a hundred, but I can't afford to miss anything."

When the alarm went off there was a noise of

yawning and grunting followed by a brief silence. Ten minutes passed, then a footstep bumped on the floor. By the sounds that followed George reckoned that Albert was bewailing the loss of his matches. Presently a figure in dishabille walked to the window of George's room and consulted a clock by a thin streak of light from an outdoor lamp. It was Albert; and as a result he swore volubly and hurried back to his own room.

A few minutes of hasty toilet interspersed with oaths, and somebody clattered down the stairs.

"He'll lose that train if he isn't careful," said George to himself. "And the wicked fellow hasn't locked my door."

A dull boom of a door closing.

"Now for it," said George, jumping out of bed and peering through the window.

He heard the footsteps of the retreating Albert going off at a trot. As they died away a man ran across the road, disappeared at the inn side, and reappeared again after an interval. It was Busby, and he started off down the road in pursuit of the landlady's son. A few minutes later and another figure followed him, to be followed shortly by two others.

"Hooray!" said George, as they disappeared.

"The suit did it."

Without hesitating, he got into the clothes left behind, wrote a note to the landlady, and was outside the house in a quarter of an hour.

Acting with due caution, he avoided the high road and reached the station as the sun burst into a blaze of glory over the trees.

"Four men?" said the porter he consulted. "Yes, and there won't 'arf be some trouble about it, too. Got in when the train was moving. Not a blooming ticket among the lot."

"Scandalous!" said George. "Where did they go to?"

"First stop, Hastings; that's all I knows," said the porter.

"And quite enough, too. What's the next train up?"

CHAPTER XXIV—*A Strawberry Mark*

GEORGE EARLY travelled a few miles up the line, then made up his mind to cut across country. Changing his plans, he took to the railway again as far as New Cross, and thought the matter out over a good breakfast. Finally he decided to return to Brunswick Terrace and make his home a stronghold until he could defy his enemies. Having thus wasted several hours, he went forward for the third time.

At Cannon Street a surprise awaited him. Hastily correcting himself as he was about to enter the buffet, he turned to the station exit, and in passing through ran against a lady.

"I beg your pardon," said the lady.

"Beg your—what, Ellen? Why, how did you know I was coming here?" cried George.

"Really, I——" the lady gasped, hesitating.

"Who told you I was coming to Cannon Street?"

"What do you mean? I don't know you!" The lady stared at him, and uttered these words with a look of astonishment on her face.

George laughed in spite of his mood. "Well, you've been getting yourself up in some new clothes; but I suppose you're my lawful wife just

the same," he said. "Anyway, this is no time for acting, Ellen."

"I beg your pardon," said the lady, quietly. "You've evidently made a mistake. You certainly know my Christian name, but you don't know me; I've never set eyes on you in my life before."

George found refuge in sarcasm. "Go on," he said; "don't mind me. You'll say I'm not your husband presently."

"You're certainly not," said the lady, firmly, preparing to continue on her way.

"Go on," said George, exasperated; "say you're not Mrs. Early; say you were never Miss Fairbrother; say you——"

"How do you know my name is Fairbrother?"

"Was—not is."

"I say *is*," said the lady, severely. "Do you know anybody named Fairbrother?"

"I once knew a girl named Fairbrother," said George, in a playful spirit. "She was a very adorable creature, so I married her. The first time I met her was in Upper Thames Street, the last in Cannon——"

"Ah!" The lady gasped and held out her hand. "You don't mean to tell me she's married? Then you must be her husband?"

"No, I'm her grandfather," said George. "Look here, Ellen, stop this rot and talk sense. I can't stand here talking——"

"I'm not your wife," said the lady, sharply. "I've just arrived from Australia, and I'm going to visit Miss Fairbrother. We're cousins."

George opened his mouth, shut it again, and looked frightfully sheepish. Ellen's cousin! Of course, his wife had got a cousin in Australia. He had heard of her; Tops she was called—evidently a pet name. But what in the world was she doing wandering about Cannon Street alone? and what did she mean by looking so tremendously like his own wife? It was obvious, though, now that she was a young person with much more confidence than his own Ellen. But, after all, why was she here at all? What was the matter with Australia?

"I've come over post-haste," said the lady in a business-like manner. "Got a cable, and went on board next day; not even time to write."

"Anybody ill?" asked George.

His cousin-in-law laughed. "No, not so bad as that; I've had a little property left me. We soon leave Australia when there's property here, don't we?"

With an effort George joined in the laugh. Girls from Australia inheriting property was not a favourite topic with him at the moment.

Miss Fairbrother's modest boxes were placed on a four-wheeler, and the two drove off to Brunswick Terrace. On the way George heard

a good deal of the childhood of his wife and of the great fun the two cousins used to have together. No doubt these anecdotes were highly humorous, but George was not in the mood for them.

Mrs. Early was just starting for Upper Thames Street when they arrived at Brunswick Terrace, and she rushed to the hall on hearing her husband's voice. As soon as she and her cousin set eyes on one another there was a double shriek.

"Babs!"

"Tops!"

Kisses, endearing epithets, squeezes, playful pats; more kisses, questions—numberless questions. George looked on in gloomy silence.

"You darling scrumptious old Tops!"

"You precious pet! you old Babs!"

More embraces, kisses, and squeezes.

"Keep it up," said George, in a bitter aside to the hatstand; "never mind the husband. What does it matter if I've been harried about the country by a lot of low ruffians, chased from one place to another, bandaged and made a mad-man? What does it matter, eh?" he repeated, looking hard at a barometer that pointed to "very dry."

"Very dry," said George, noticing it; "suppose I'm very dry, what of that? What of it? What does it matter?" raising his voice.

Mrs. Early suddenly tore herself from the embrace of her cousin, and threw her arms about her husband's neck.

"Oh, you dear old Georgy-Porgy! What a shame to leave him all alone! What a naughty, bad old girl!"

Somewhat mollified by this display of affection, George at last was prevailed upon to smile, and to give a brief account of his adventures, without moving from the spot. His wife assured him that everything would come right, and declared that his pursuers were the worst and horridest men in the world. She then gave him three special kisses for finding Tops, and bade him take a good look at that young lady from a distance of six feet, and say if she wasn't the dearest, sweetest, and prettiest girl in the world.

George did so, and diplomatically gave it as his opinion that she was the "second prettiest."

Mrs. Early dimpled, and, after vowing that her husband was a dear old stupid, warned him to prepare for a special favour.

"What is it?" asked the young man.

Mrs. Early looked first at her husband, then at her cousin, and then placing her hands behind her, and looking as regal and magnanimous as possible, she said—

"George, you may kiss Tops."

Like a dutiful husband, George obeyed, but

not before Mrs. Early had received a scolding from her cousin, who received the salute under protest.

At dinner that evening George almost forgot his woes in the unceasing flow of conversation. Miss Fairbrother's legacy was the chief topic. In spite of the urgent cable presaging "a valuable property," this appeared to be nothing more than "a freehold house at Brixton with a long garden."

"It'll be nice to live in without rent," said Miss Fairbrother; "but of course I shall have to work for my bread-and-butter. Anyhow, I shall be near Babs, so it's worth having on that account."

Aunt Phoebe gave her reminiscences of the sailing of the two cousins for Australia at the age of two years each, with a graphic description of the scene at the docks.

"Your papa was in the height of his success then," she said to Mrs. Early, "and his brother was doing well. The strangest thing was that they both married when nearly fifty, and both were left widowers within three years with a baby-girl each. I offered to take care of the two of you, but as your Aunt Mary was going a voyage to Australia, and the change was thought good for you, away you both went with her. Of course we never dreamt of her staying there and you two staying with her."

"If papa was doing well when I went away, what became of his fortune?" asked Miss Fairbrother.

"He married again," said Aunt Phœbe, "and lost the greater part of it through the extravagance of his wife. I'm glad he managed to keep a house out of it for you; it was little enough to do."

"Poor papa!"

"Yes, I suppose he deserves to be pitied," said Aunt Phœbe. "But John never had the good sense of Joseph. They were both J. Fairbrother's, but the one J. was very different from the other in business ability. I always thought it absurd that John should imitate Joseph in calling his baby-girl by the same name. You were born within a week of each other, and both named Ellen."

"What a funny thing," said Mrs. Early, laughing, "that we never got mixed up!"

"Yes, indeed," said Aunt Phœbe. "I remember your poor father telling your Aunt Mary, with a smile, to be sure to keep you separate."

"'They're separate enough!' said John, laughing. 'One's got a strawberry mark, Mary, and remember the strawberry mark's mine.' Then your father——"

"Aunt," said Miss Fairbrother, in a queer

voice, "did you say the strawberry mark was on John's baby or on——"

"John Fairbrother's baby-girl had a strawberry mark," said Aunt Phoebe; "that's how we knew the difference, you were so much alike."

Mrs. Early and her cousin looked at each other. George put down the glass he was raising to his lips and looked at them both. Aunt Phoebe rose from her seat suddenly and said—

"What is it? You don't mean to say——"

Mrs. Early drew up the sleeve of her gown and exposed the bare, pretty arm, with its significant birth-mark.

"John's girl!" gasped her aunt.

There was a deathly silence. The clock on the mantelshelf ticked away in regular monotonous beats, every sound in the street could be heard distinctly, and of the four people at the table three were looking in wonderment at the birth-mark on Mrs. Early's arm.

George, on whom the significance of the whole thing had dawned with great rapidity, sat with his mouth open until he had thoroughly grasped the situation. Then he said in a feeble whisper—

"Would somebody mind passing the brandy?"

CHAPTER XXV—*Name o' Phoebe*

AN Elephant 'bus stopped at the corner of New Bridge Street to pick up a passenger, and then struggled on again towards Blackfriars Bridge.

"By the way, Cattermole," said a man in a top hat to his friend in a bowler, "what was the result of that little skirmish in the country you told me about some time ago?"

The Walworth chemist laughed and buttoned up his coat.

"That all ended in smoke," he said. "I got a wire telling me not to bother about going down again, as my friend had given them the slip and got away."

"But they got some money out of him, I suppose? It was a money job, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but they didn't get any money, as it happened. It turned out that my friend's wife wasn't the heiress to the property; it really belonged to her cousin."

"He had to hand it over, then?"

"Yes, the wife's cousin took the property, and I'm told she has enough business ability to run three firms as big as that."

"Hard luck for your friend!"

"Oh! not such hard luck. He's a sort of

manager there. He draws a decent salary, and they have a freehold house in Brixton. They're not badly off. The three men their old positions back, so everything's pretty comfortable."

"Blackfriars!" yelled the 'bus conductor, "Elephant, Kennington, and Brixton. Now for Brix—ton!"

A man jumped on and clambered up to the top.

"What—George!"

Cattermole and George Early shook hands, and George was introduced to the man in the top hat.

"Business good?" asked Cattermole.

"Splendid!" said George. He whispered in his friend's ear.

Cattermole held out his hand again. "I congratulate you, old man!" he said. "What are you going to call her?"

Instead of replying directly George poured some further confidence into his friend's ear, and accompanied the recital by sundry taps on his friend's coat-sleeve.

"No!" said Cattermole at the finish. "Worth as much as fifteen thousand! She's your aunt, isn't she?"

"My wife's," said George, in a whisper.

"I thought she professed to be poor?"

"So she does"—with a wink.

"You're a devil for finding out things," said Cattermole, with some admiration. "So I suppose you're going to call the girl——"

"Phoebe," said George. Cattermole laughed, and his friend, who had caught some scraps of the conversation, laughed also. George joined them.

"I suppose it'll work all right?" said Cattermole.

"Coming to stay a month," said George; "you can leave the rest to me."

"Well, I hope you're backing a winner," said Cattermole.

"It's a cert," said George. "Baby holds the reins."

"Elephant!" yelled the 'bus conductor.

"We get off here," said Cattermole. He and his friend shook hands and went down the steps. George changed his seat for one next to the driver, and the 'bus rattled on to Brixton.

LATEST FICTION.

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